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THE DESIRE OF THE MOTH

AND

THE COME ON

BY

EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES

AUTHOR OF

BRANSFORD OF RAINBOW RANGE,
GOOD MEN AND TRUE,
WEST IS WEST, ETC.

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THEY WERE RIDING HARD. [*See page* 108.]

ILLUSTRATIONS

They were riding hard . . . *Frontispiece*
"Gentlemen—be seated!" . . . 38

TRANSFER FROM C.O. SEP 1928

SIRE OF THE MOTH

Chapter I

t Door—her years are few—
more than her elders do;
rinkles become me so;
uch at the tales I know.
hall marry when she is grown ——"

ttle happy song stopped short. Wesley Pringle, at the mesa's last [illegible], drew rein to adjust his geography. This was new country to him.

Close behind, Organ Mountain flung up a fantasy of spires, needle-sharp and bare and golden. The long straight range—saw-toothed limestone save for this twenty-mile sheer upheaval of the Organ—stretched away to north and south against the unclouded sky, till distance turned the barren gray to blue-

black, to blue, to misty haze; till the sharp, square-angled masses rounded to hillocks—to a blur—a wavy line—nothing.

More than a hundred miles to the northwest, two midget mountains wavered in the sky. John Wesley nodded at their unforgotten shapes and pieced this vast landscape to the patchwork map in his head. Those toy hills were San Mateo and Magdalena. Pringle had passed that way on a bygone year, headed east. He was going west, now.

"I'm too prosperous here," he had explained to Beebe and Ballinger, his partners on Rainbow. "I'm tedious to myself. Guess I'll take a *pasear* back to Prescott. Railroad? Who, me? Why, son, I like to travel when I go anywheres. Just starting and arriving don't delight me any. Besides, I don't know that strip along the border. I'll ride."

It was a tidy step to Prescott—say, as far as from Philadelphia to Savannah, or from

Richmond to Augusta; but John Wesley had made many such rides in the Odyssey of his wonder years. Some of them had been made in haste. But there was no haste now. Sam Bass, his corn-fed sorrel, was hardly less sleek and sturdy than at the start, though a third of the way was behind him. Pringle rode by easy stages, and where he found himself pleased, there he tarried for a space.

With another friendly nod to the northward hills that marked a day of his past, Pringle turned his eyes to the westlands, outspread and vast before him. To his right the desert stretched away, a mighty plain dotted with low hills, rimmed with a curving, jagged range. Beyond that range was a nothingness, a hiatus that marked the sunken valley of the Rio Grande; beyond that, a headlong infinity of unknown ranges, tier on tier, yellow or brown or blue; broken, tumbled, huddled, scattered, with gulfs between to tell of

unseen plains and hidden happy valleys—altogether giving an impression of rushing toward him, resistless, like the waves of a stormy sea.

At his feet the plain broke away sharply, in a series of steplike sandy benches, to where the Rio Grande bore quartering across the desert, turning to the Mexican sea; the Mesilla Valley here, a slender ribbon of mossy green, broidered with loops of flashing river —a ribbon six miles by forty, orchard, woodland, and green field, greener for the desolate gray desert beyond and the yellow hills of sand edging the valley floor. Below him Las Uvas, chief town of the valley, lay basking in the sun, tiny square and street bordered with greenery: its domino houses white-walled in the sun, with larger splashes of red from courthouse or church or school.

Far on the westering desert, beyond the valley, Pringle saw a white feather of smoke

from a toiling train; beyond that a twisting gap in the blue of the westmost range.

"That's our road." He lifted his bridle rein. "Amble along, Sam!"

To that amble he crooned to himself, pleasantly, half-dreamily—as if he voiced indirectly some inner thought—quaint snatches of old song:

"She came to the gate and she peeped in—
Grass and the weeds up to her chin;
Said, 'A rake and a hoe and a fantail plow
Would suit you better than a wife just now.'"

And again:

"Schooldays are over now,
Lost all our bliss;
But love remembers yet
Quarrel and kiss.
Still, as in days of yore ——"

Then, after a long silence, with a thoughtful earnestness that Rainbow would scarce have credited, he quoted a verse from what he was wont to call Billy Beebe's Bible:

"One Moment in Annihilation's waste,
One Moment of the Well of Life to taste—
The Stars are setting, and the Caravan
Starts for the Dawn of —— Nothing. Oh, make
haste!"

After late dinner at the Gadsden Purchase, Pringle had tidings of the Motion Picture Palace; and thither he bent his steps. He was late and the palace was a very small palace indeed; it was with difficulty that he spied in the semidarkness an empty seat in a side section. A fat lady and a fatter man, in the seats nearest the aisle, obligingly moved over rather than risk any attempt to squeeze by. Beyond them, as he took the end seat, Pringle was dimly aware of a girl who looked at him rather attentively.

He turned his mind to the screen, where a natty and noble young man, with a chin, bit off his words distinctly and smote his extended palm with folded gloves to emphasize the remarks he was making to a far less natty man

with black mustaches. John Wesley rightly concluded that this second man, who gnashed his teeth so convincingly, and at whom an incredibly beautiful young lady looked with haughty disdain, was the villain, and foiled.

The blond and shaven hero, with a magnificent gesture, motioned the villain to begone! That baffled person, after waiting long enough to register despair, spread his fingers across his brow and be-went; the hero turned, held out his arms; the scornful young beauty crept into them. Click! On the screen appeared a scroll:

Keep Your Seats. Two Minutes to Change Reels.

The lights were turned on. Pringle looked at the crowd—girls, grandmas, mothers with their families, many boys, and few men; Americans, Mexicans, well-dressed folk and

roughly dressed, all together. Many were leaving; among them Pringle's fat and obliging neighbors rose with a pleasant: "Excuse me, please!"

A stream of newcomers trickled in through the door. As Pringle sat down the lights were dimmed again. Simultaneously the girl he had noticed beyond the fat couple moved over to the seat next to his own. Pringle did not look at her; and a little later he felt a hand on his sleeve.

"Tut, tut!" said Pringle in a tolerant undertone. "Why, chicken, you're not trying to get gay with your old Uncle Dudley, are you?"

"John Wesley Pringle!" came the answer in a furious whisper, each indignant word a missile. "How dare you! How dare you speak to me like that?"

"What!" said Pringle, peering. "What! Stella Vorhis! I can hardly believe it!"

"But it's oh-so-true!" said Stella, rising. "Let's go—we can't talk here."

"That was one awful break I made. I most sincerely and humbly beg your pardon," Pringle said on the sidewalk.

Stella laughed.

"That's all right—I understand—forget it! You hadn't looked at me. But I knew you when you first came in—only I wasn't sure till the lights were turned on. Of course it would be great fun to tease you—pretend to be shocked and dreadfully angry, and all that—but I haven't got time. And oh, John Wesley, I'm so delighted to see you again! Let's go over to the park. Not but what I was dreadfully angry, sure enough, until I had a second to think. Why don't you say you're glad to see me—after five years?"

"Stella! You know I am. Six years, please. But I thought you were still in Prescott?"

"We came here three years ago. Here's a bench. Now tell it to me!"

But Pringle stood beside and looked down at her without speech, with a smile unexpected from a face so lean, so brown, so year-bitten and iron-hard—a smile which happily changed that face, and softened it.

The girl's eyes danced at him.

"I'm so glad you've come, John Wesley! Good old Wes!"

"So I am—both those little things. Six years!" he said slowly. "Dear me—dear both of us! That will make you twenty-five. You don't look a day over twenty-four! But you're still Stella Vorhis?"

She met his gaze gravely; then her lids drooped and a wave of red flushed her face.

"I am Stella Vorhis—yet."

"Meaning—for a little while yet?"

"Meaning, for a little while yet. That will come later, John Wesley. Oh, I'll tell

you, but not just now. You tell about John Wesley, first—and remember, anything you say may be used against you. Where have you been? Were you dead? Why didn't you write? Has the world used you well? Sit down, Mr. John Wesley Also-Ran Pringle, and give an account of yourself!"

He sat beside her: she laid her hand across his gnarled brown fingers with an unconscious caress.

"It's good to see you, old-timer! Begin now—I, John Wesley Pringle, am come from going to and fro upon the earth and from walkng up and down in it. But I didn't ask you where you were living. Perhaps you have a—home of your own now."

John Wesley firmly lifted her slim fingers from his hand and as firmly deposited them in her lap.

"Kindly keep your hands to yourself, young woman," he said with stately dignity.

"Here is an exact account of all my time since I saw you: I have been hungry, thirsty, sleepy, tired. To remedy these evils, upon expert advice I have eaten, drunk, slept, and rested. I have worked and played, been dull and gay, busy and idle, foolish and unwise. That's all. Oh, yes—I'm living in Rainbow Mountain; cattle. Two pardners—nice boys but educated. Had another one; he's married now, poor dear—and just as happy as if he had some sense."

"You're not?"

"Not what—happy or married?"

"Married, silly!"

"And I'm not. Now it's your turn. Where do you live? Here in town?"

"Oh, no. Dad's got a farm twenty miles up the river and a ranch out on the flat. I just came down on the morning train to do a little shopping and go back on the four-forty-eight—and I'll have to be starting soon.

You'll walk down to the station with me?"

"But the sad story of your life?" objected Pringle.

"Oh, I'll tell you that by installments. You're to make us a long, long visit, you know—just as long as you can stay. You're horseback, of course? Well, then, ride up to-night. Ask for Aden Station. We live just beyond there."

"But the Major was a very hostile major when I saw him last."

"Oh, father's got all over that. He hadn't heard your side of it then. He often speaks of you now and he'll be glad to see you."

"To-morrow, then. My horse is tired—I'll stay here to-night."

"You'll find dad changed," said the girl. "This is the first time in his life he has ever been at ease about money matters. He's really quite well-to-do."

"That's good. I'm doing well in that line too. I forgot to tell you." There was no elation in his voice; he looked back with a pang to the bold and splendid years of their poverty. "Then the Major will quit wandering round like a lost cat, won't he?"

"I think he likes it here—only for the crazy-mad political feeling; and I think he's settled down for good."

"High time, I think, at his age."

"You needn't talk! Dad's only ten years older than you are." She leaned her cheek on her hand, she brushed back a little stray tendril of midnight hair from her dark eyes, and considered him thoughtfully. "Why, John Wesley, I've known you nearly all my life and you don't look much older now than when I first saw you."

"That was in Virginia City. You were just six years old and your pony ran away with you. We were great old chums for a

month or so. The next time I saw you was——"

"At Bakersfield—at mother's funeral," said the girl softly. "Then you came to Prescott, and you had lost your thumb in the meantime; and I was Little Next Door to you——"

"And Prescott and me, we agreed it was best for both of us that I should go away."

"Yes; and when you came back you were going to stay. Why didn't you stay, John Wesley?"

"I think," said Pringle reflectively, "that I have forgotten that."

"Do you know, John Wesley, I have never been back to any place we have left once? And of all the people I have ever known, you are the only one I have ever lost track of and found again. And you're always just the same old John Wesley; always gay and

cheerful; nearly always in trouble; always strong and resourceful——"

"How true!" said Pringle. "Yes, yes; go on!"

"Well, you are! And you're so—so reliable; like Faithful John in the fairy story. You're different from anyone else I know. You're a good boy; when you are grown up you shall have a yoke of oxen, over and above your wages."

"This is very gratifying indeed," observed Pringle. "But—a sweetly solemn thought comes to me. You were going to tell me about another boy—the onliest little boy?"

"He's not a boy," said Stella, flushing hotly. "He's a man—a man's man. You'll like him, John Wesley—he's just your kind. I'm not going to tell you. You'll see him at our house, with the others. And he'll be the very one you'd pick out for me yourself. Of course you'll want to tease me by pretending

to guess someone else; but you'll know which one he is, without me telling you. He stands out apart from all other men in every way. Come on, John Wesley—it's time to go down to the station."

Pringle caught step with her.

"And how long—if a reliable old faithful John may ask—before you become Stella Some-One-Else?"

"At Christmas. And I am a very lucky girl, John. What an absurd convention it is that people are never supposed to congratulate the girl—as if no man was ever worth having! Silly, isn't it?"

"Very silly. But then, it's a silly world."

"A delightful world," said Stella, her eyes sparkling. "You don't know how happy I am. Or perhaps you do know. Tell me honestly, did you ever l—like anyone, this way?"

"I refuse to answer, by advice of counsel," said John Wesley. "I'll say this much,

though. X marks no spot where any Annie Laurie gave me her promise true."

When the train had gone John Wesley wandered disconsolately back to his hotel and rested his elbows on the bar. The white-aproned attendant hastened to serve him.

"What will it be, sir?"

"Give me a gin pitfall," said John Wesley.

Chapter II

"COLD feet?"

"Horrible!" said Anastacio.

Matthew Lisner, sheriff of Dona Ana, bent a hard eye on his subordinate.

"It's got to be done," he urged. "To elect our ticket we must have all the respectable and responsible people of the valley. If we can provoke Foy into an outbreak——"

"Not we—you," corrected Anastacio. "Myself, I do not feel provoking."

"Are you going to lay down on me?"

"If you care to put it that way—yes. Kit Foy is just the man to leave alone."

"Now, listen!" said the sheriff impatiently. "Half the valley is owned by newcomers, men of substance, who, with the votes they influence or control, will decide

the election. Foy is half a hero with them, because of these vague old stories. But let him be stirred up to violence now and you'll see! They won't see any romance in it—just an open outrage; they will flock to us to the last man. Ours is the party of law and order——"

"Law *to* order, some say."

The veins swelled in the sheriff's heavy face and thick neck; he regarded his deputy darkly.

"That comes well from you, Barela! Don't you see, with the law on our side all these men of substance will be with us unconditionally? I tell you, Christopher Foy is the brains of his party. Once he is discredited——"

"And I tell you that I am the brains of your party and I'll have nothing to do with your fine plan. 'Tis an old stratagem to call oppression, law, and resistance to oppression,

lawlessness. You tried just that in ninety-six, didn't you? And I never could hear that our side had any the best of it or that the good name of Dona Ana was in any way bettered by our wars. Come, Mr. Lisner—the Kingdom of Lady Ann has been quiet now for nearly eight years. Let us leave it so. For myself, the last row brought me reputation and place, made me chief deputy under two sheriffs—so I need have the less hesitation in setting forth my passionate preference for peace."

"You have as much to gain as I have," growled the sheriff. "Besides your own cinch, you have one of your *gente* for deputy in every precinct in the county."

"Exactly! And if we have wars again, who but the Barelas would bear the brunt? No, no, Mr. Matt Lisner; while I may be a merely ornamental chief deputy, it will never be denied that I am a very careful chief to

my *gente.* Be sure that I shall think more than once or twice before I set a man of my men at a useless hazard to pleasure you—or to reëlect you."

"You speak plainly."

"I intend to. I speak for three hundred—and we vote solid. Make no mistake, Mr. Lisner. You need me in your business, but I can do nicely without you."

"Perhaps you'd like to be sheriff yourself."

"I might like it—except that I am not as young and foolish as I was," said Anastacio, smiling. "Now that I am so old, and so wise and all, it is clear to see that neither myself nor any of the fighting men of the mad old days—on either side—should be sheriff."

"You were not always so thoughtful of the best interests of the dear pee-pul," sneered the sheriff.

"That I wasn't. I was as silly and hot-brained a fool as either side could boast. But you, Sheriff, are neither silly nor hot-headed. In cold blood you are planning that men shall die; that other men shall rot in prison. Why? For hate and revenge? Not even that. Oh, a little spice of revenge, perhaps; Foy and his friends made you something of a laughing stock. But your main motive is—money. And I don't see why. You've got all the money any one man needs now."

"I notice you get your share."

"I hope so. But, even as a money-making proposition, your troubled-voters policy is a mistake. All the mountain men want is to be let alone, and you might be sheriff for life for all they care. But you fan up every little bicker into a lawsuit—don't I know? Just for the mileage—ten cents a mile each way in a county that's jam full of miles from one

edge to the other; ten cents a mile each way for each and every arrest and subpœna. You drag them to court twice a year—the farmer at seed time and harvest, the cowman from the spring and fall round-ups. It hurts, it cripples them, they ride thirty miles to vote against you; it costs you all the extra mileage money to offset their votes. As a final folly, you purpose deliberately to stir up the old factions. What was it Napoleon said? 'It is worse than a crime: it is a blunder.' I'll tell you now, not a Barela nor an Ascarate shall stir a foot in such a quarrel. If you want to bait Kit Foy, do it yourself—or set your city police on him."

"I will."

A faint tinge of color came to the clear olive of Anastacio's cheek as he rose.

"But don't promise my place to any of them, sheriff. I might hear of it."

"Stranger," said Ben Creagan, "you can't play pool! I can't—and I beat you four straight games. You better toddle your little trotters off to bed." The words alone might have been mere playfulness; glance and tone made plain the purposed offense.

The after-supper crowd in the hotel bar-room had suddenly slipped away, leaving Max Barkeep, three others, and John Wesley Pringle—the last not unnoting of nudge and whisper attending the exodus. Since that, Pringle had suffered, unprotesting, more gratuitous insults than he had met in all the rest of his stormy years. His curiosity was aroused; he played the stupid, unseeing, patient, and timid person he was so eminently not. Plainly these people desired his absence; and Pringle highly resolved to know why. He now blinked mildly.

"But I'm not sleepy a-tall," he objected.

He tried and missed an easy shot; he chalked his cue with assiduous care.

"Here, you! Quit knockin' those balls round!" bawled Max, the bartender. "What you think this is—a kindergarten?"

"Why, I paid for all the games I lost, didn't I?" asked Pringle, much abashed.

He mopped his face. It was warm, though the windows and doors were open.

"Well, nobody's going to play any more with you," snapped Max. "You bore 'em."

He pyramided the balls and covered the table. With a sad and lingering backward look Pringle slouched abjectly through the wide-arched doorway to the bar.

"Come on, fellers—have something."

"Naw!" snarled José Espalin. "I'm a-tryin' to theenk. Shut up, won't you?"

Pringle sighed patiently at the rebuff and stole a timid glance at the thinker. Espalin was a lean little, dried-up manikin, with legs,

arms, and mustaches disproportionately long for his dwarfish body. His black, wiry hair hung in ragged witchlocks; his black pin-point eyes were glittering, cold, and venomous. He looked, thought Pringle, very much like a spider.

"I'm steerin' you right, old man," said Creagan. "You'd better drag it for bed."

"I ain't sleepy, I tell you."

Espalin leaped up, snarling.

"Say! You lukeing for troubles, maybe? Bell, I theenk thees *hombre* got a gun. Shall we freesk him?"

As he flung the query over his shoulder his beady little eyes did not leave Pringle's.

Bell Applegate got leisurely to his feet—a tall man, well set up, with a smooth-shaved, florid face and red hair.

"If he has we'll jack him in the jug." He threw back the lapel of his coat, displaying a silver star.

"But I ain't got no gun," protested John Wesley meekly. "You-all can see for yourself."

"We will—don't worry! Don't you make one wrong move or I'll put out your light!"

"Be you the sheriff?"

"Police. Go to him, Ben!"

"No gun," reported Ben after a swift search of the shrinking captive.

"I done told you so, didn't I?"

"Mighty good thing for you, old rooster. Gun-toting is strictly barred in Las Uvas. You got to take your gun off fifteen minutes after you get in from the road and you can't put it on till fifteen minutes before you take the road again."

"Is that—er—police regulations or state law?"

"State law—and has been any time these twenty-five years. Say, you doddering old

fool, what do you think this is—a night school?"

"I—I guess I'll go to bed," said Pringle miserably.

"I—I guess if you come back I'll throw you out," mimicked Ben with a guffaw.

Pringle made no answer. He shuffled into the hall and up the stairway to his bedroom. He unlocked the door noisily; he opened it noisily; he took his sixshooter and belt from the wall quietly and closed the door, noisily again; he locked it—from the outside. Then he did a curious thing; he sat down very gently and removed his boots.

The four in the barroom listened, grinning. When they heard Pringle's door slam shut Bell Applegate nodded and Creagan went out on the street. Behind him, at a table near the pool-room door, the law planned ways and means in a slinking undertone.

"You keep in the background, Joe. Let us do the talking. Foy just naturally despises you—we might not get him to stay the fifteen minutes out. You stay back there. Remember now, don't shoot till Ben lets him get his arm loose. *Sabe?*"

"Maybe Meester Ben don't find heem."

"Oh, yes, he will. Ditch meeting to-night. Ought to be out about now. Setting the time to use the water and assessing *fatiga* work. Every last man with a water right will be there, sure, and Foy's got a dozen. Max, you are to be a witness, remember, and you mustn't be mixed up in it. Got your story straight?"

"Foy he comes in and makes a war-talk about Dick Marr," recited Max. "After we powwow awhile you see his gun. You tell him he's under arrest for carryin' concealed weapons. You and Ben grabbed his arm; he

jerked loose and went after his gun. And then Joe shot him."

"That's it. We'll all stick to that. S-st! Here they come!"

There are men whose faces stand out in a crowd, men you turn to look after on the street. Such—quite apart from his sprightly past—was Christopher Foy, who now entered with Creagan. He was about thirty, above middle height, every mold and line of him slender and fine and strong. His face was resolute, vivacious, intelligent; his eyes were large and brown, pleasant and fearless. A wide black hat, pushed back now, showed a broad forehead white against crisp coal-black hair and the pleasant tan of neck and cheek. But it was not his dark, forceful face alone that lent him such distinction. Rather it was the perfect poise and balance of the man, the ease and unconscious grace of every swift and sure motion. He wore a working garb

now—blue overalls and a blue rowdy. But he wore them with an air that made him well dressed.

Foy paused for a second; Applegate rose.

"Well, Chris!" he laughed. "There has been a time when you might not have fancied this particular bunch—hey? All over now, please the pigs. Come in and give it a name. Beer for mine."

"I'll smoke," said Foy.

"Me too," said Espalin.

He lit a cigar and returned to his chair. Ben Creagan passed behind the bar and handed over a sixshooter and a cartridge belt.

"Here, Chris—here's the gun I borrowed of you when I broke mine. Much obliged."

Foy twirled the cylinder to make sure the hammer was on an empty chamber and buckled the belt under his rowdy.

"My hardware is mostly plows and scrap-

ers and irrigating hoes nowadays," he remarked. "Good thing too."

"All the same, Foy, I'd keep a gun with me if I were you. Dick Marr is drinking again—and when he soaks it up he gets discontented over old times, you know." Applegate lowered his voice, with a significant glance at Espalin. "He threatened your life to-day. I thought you ought to know it."

Foy considered his cigar.

"That's awkward," he replied briefly.

"Chris," said Ben, "this isn't the first time. Dick's heart is bad to you. I'm sorry. He was my friend and you were not. But you're not looking for any trouble now. Dick is. And I'm afraid he'll keep on till he gets it. Me and the sheriff we managed to get him off to bed, but he says he's going to shoot you on sight—and I believe he means it. You ought to have him bound over to keep the peace."

Foy smiled and shook his head.

"I can't do that—and it would only make him madder than ever. But I'll get out of his way and keep out of his way. I'll go up to the Jornado to-night and stay with the Bar Cross boys awhile. He won't come up there."

"You'll enjoy having people tellin' how you run away to keep from meeting Dick Marr?" said Applegate incredulously.

"Why shouldn't they say it? It will be exactly true," responded Foy quietly, "and you're authorized to say so. I'm learning some sense now; I'm getting to own quite a mess of property; I'm going to be married soon; and I don't want to fight anyone. Besides, quite apart from my own interests, other men will be drawn into it if I shoot it out with Marr. No knowing where it will stop. No, sir; I'll go punch cows till Marr quiets down. Maybe it's just the whisky talk-

ing. Dick isn't such a bad fellow when he's not fighting booze. Or maybe he'll go away. He hasn't much to keep him here."

"Say, I could get a job offered to him out in San Simon," said Applegate, brightening.

His eye rested on the clock over the long mirror. He stepped over to the show case, clipped the end from a cigar and obtained a light from a shapely bronze lady with a torch. When he came back he fell in on Foy's left; at Foy's right Creagan leaned his elbows on the bar.

"Well, I'm obliged to you, boys," said Foy. "This one's on me. Come on, Joe—have a hoot."

"Thanks, no," said Espalin. "I not dreenkin' none thees times. Eef I dreenk some I get full, and loose my job maybe."

"Vichy," said Foy. "Take something yourself, Max."

As Mr. Max poured the drinks an odd experience befell Mr. José Espalin. His tilted chair leaned against the casing of the billiard-room door. As Max filled the first glass Espalin became suddenly aware of something round and hard and cold pressed against his right temple. Mr. Espalin felt some curiosity, but he sat perfectly still. The object shifted a few inches; Mr. Espalin perceived from the tail of his eye the large, unfeeling muzzle of a sixshooter; beyond it, a glimpse of the forgotten elderly stranger, Mr. Pringle.

Only Mr. Pringle's fighting face appeared, and that but for a moment; he laid a finger to lip and crouched, hidden by the partition and by Espalin's body. Mr. Espalin gathered that Pringle desired no outcry and shunned observation; he sat motionless accordingly; he felt a hand at his belt, which removed his gun.

"GENTLEMEN—BE SEATED!"

"Happy days!" said Foy, and raised his glass to his lips.

Creagan seized the uplifted wrist with both hands, Applegate pounced on the other arm. Pringle leaped through the doorway. But something happened swifter than Pringle's swift rush. Foy's knee shot up to Applegate's stomach. Applegate fell, sprawling. Foy hurled himself on Creagan and bore him crashing to the floor. Foy whirled over; he rose on one hand and knee, gun drawn, visibly annoyed; also considerably astonished at the unexpected advent of Mr. Pringle. Applegate lay groaning on the floor. Pringle kicked his gun from the holster and set foot upon it; one of his own guns covered the bartender and the other kept watch on Espalin, silent on his still-tilted chair.

"Who're you!" challenged Foy.

"Friend with the countersign. Don't shoot! Don't shoot me, anyhow."

Foy rose from hand and knee to knee and foot. This rescuer, so opportunely arrived from nowhere, seemed to be an ally. But to avoid mistakes, Foy's gun followed Pringle's motions, at the same time willing and able to blow out Creagan's brains if advisable. He also acquired Creagan's gun quite subconsciously.

"Let me introduce myself, gentlemen," said Pringle. "I'm Jack-in-a-Pinch, Little Friend of the Under Dog—see Who's This? page two-thirteen. My German friend, come out from behind that bar—hands up—step lively! Spot yourself! My Mexican friend, join Mr. Max. Move, you poisonous little spider—jump! That's better! Gentlemen—be seated! Right there—smack, slapdab on the floor. Sit down and think. Say! I'm serious. Am I going to have to kill some few of you just because you don't know who I am? I'll count three! One!

two!—That's it. Very good—hold that—register anticipation! I am a worldly man," said Pringle with emotion, "but this spectacle touches me—it does indeed!"

"I'll get square with you!" gurgled Applegate, as fiercely as his breathless condition would permit.

"George—may I call you George? I don't know your name. You may get square with me, George—but you'll never be square with anyone. You are a rhomboidinaltitudinous isosohedronal catawampus, George!"

George raved unprintably. He made a motion to rise, but reconsidered it as he noted the tension of Pringle's trigger finger.

"Don't be an old fuss-budget, George," said Pringle reprovingly. "Because I forgot to tell you—I've got my gun now—and yours. You won't need to arrest me, though, for I'm hitting the trail in fifteen minutes. But if I wasn't going—and if you had your

gun—you couldn't arrest one side of me. You couldn't arrest one of my old boots! Listen, George! You heard this Chris-gentleman give his reasons for wanting peace? Yes? Well, it's oh-so-different here. I hate peace! I loathe, detest, abhor, and abominate peace! My very soul with strong disgust is stirred—by peace! I'm growing younger every year, I don't own any property here, I'm not going to be married; I ain't feeling pretty well anyhow; and if you don't think I'll shoot, try to get up! Just look as if you thought you wanted to wish to try to make an effort to get up."

"How—who——" began Creagan; but Pringle cut him short.

"Ask me no more, sweet! You have no speaking part here. We'll do the talking. I just love to talk. I am the original tongue-tied man; I ebb and flow. Don't let me hear a word from any of you! Well, pardner?"

Foy, still kneeling in fascinated amaze, now rose. Creagan's nose was bleeding profusely.

"That was one awful wallop you handed our gimlet-eyed friend," said Pringle admiringly. "Neatest bit of work I ever saw. Sir, to you! My compliments!" He placed a chair near the front door and sat down. "I feel like a lion in a den of Daniels," he sighed.

"But how did you happen to be here so handy?" inquired Foy.

"Didn't happen—I did it on purpose," said John Wesley. "You see, these four birds tipped their hand. All evening they been instructing me where I got off. They would-ed I had the wings of a dove, so I might fly far, far away and be at rest. Now, I put it to you, do I look like a dove?"

"Not at present," laughed Foy.

"Well, I didn't like it—nobody would. I see there was a hen on, I knew the lay of the ground from looking after my horse. So I clomped off to bed, got my good old Excalibur gun—full name X. L. V. Caliber—slipped off my boots, tippytoed down the back stairs like a Barred Rock cat, oozed in by the side door—and here I be! I overheard their pleasant little plan to do you. I meant to do the big rescue act, but you mobilize too quick for me. All the same, maybe it's as well I chipped in, because—take a look at them cartridges in your gun, will you? Your own gun—the one they borrowed from you."

Foy twisted a bullet from a cartridge. There was no powder. The four men on the floor looked unhappy under his thoughtful eye.

"Nice little plant—what? Do we kill 'em?" said Pringle cheerfully. "I don't

know the rules well enough to break them. What was the big idea? Was they vexed at you, son?"

"It would seem so," said Foy, smiling. "We had a little war here a spell back. I suspect they wanted to stir it up again for political effect. Election this fall."

"And you were not in their party? I see!" said Pringle, nodding intelligently. "Well, they sure had it fixed to make your side lose one vote—fixed good and proper. The Ben-boy was to let your right hand loose and the Joe-boy was to shoot you as you pulled your gun. Why, if you had lived to make a statement your own story woulda mighty near let them out."

"I believe that I am greatly obliged to you, sir."

"I believe you are," said Pringle. "And —but, also, I know the two gentlemen you were drinking with should be very grateful

to you. They had just half a second more to live—and you beat me to it. Too bad! Well, what next?"

Foy pondered a little.

"I guess I'll go up to the Bar Cross wagon, as I intended, till things simmer down. The Las Uvas warriors seldom ever bother the Bar Cross Range. My horse is hitched up the street. How'd you like to go along with me, stranger? You and me would make a fair-sized crowd."

"I'd like it fine and dandy," said Pringle. "But I got a little visit to make to-morrow. Maybe I'll join you later. I like Las Uvas," stated John Wesley, beaming. "Nice, lively little place! I think I'll settle down here after a bit. Some of the young fellows are shy on good manners. But I can teach 'em. I'd enjoy it. . . . Now, let's see: If you'll hold these lads a few minutes I'll get my boots and saddle up and bring my horse to

the door; then I'll pay Max my hotel bill and talk to them while you get your horse; and we'll ride together till we get out in the open. How's that for a lay?"

That was a good lay, it seemed; and it was carried out—with one addition: After Foy brought his horse he rang Central and called up the sheriff.

"Hello! That you, Mr. Lisner? This is Kitty Foy," he said sweetly. "Sheriff, I hate to bother you, but old Nueces River, your chief of police, is out of town. And I thought you ought to know that the police force is all balled up. They're here at the Gadsden Purchase. Bell Applegate is sick—seems to be indigestion; Espalin is having a nervous spell; and Ben Creagan is bleeding from his happiest vein. You'd better come see to 'em. Good-by!"

Pringle smiled benevolently from the door.

"There! I almost forgot to tell you boys. We disapprove of your actions oh-very-much! You know you were doing what was very, very wrong—like three little mice that were playing in the barn though the old mouse said: 'Little mice, beware! When the owl comes singing "Too-whoo" take care!' If you do it again we shall consider it deliberately unfriendly of you. . . . Well, I'll toddle my decrepit old bones out of this. Eleven o'clock! How time has flown, to be sure! Thank you for a pleasant evening. Good-by, George. Good-by, all! Be good little boys—go nighty-nighty!"

They raced to the corner, scurried down the first side street, turned again, and slowed to a gallop. Pringle was in high feather; he caroled blithesome as he rode:

"So those three little owls flew back up in the barn—
Inky, dinky, doodum, day!

And they said, 'Those little mice make us feel so nice and warm!'
Inky, dinky, doodum, day!
Then they all began to sing, 'Too-whit! Too-who!'
I don't think much of this song, do you?
But there's one thing about it—'tis certainly true—
Inky, dinky, doodum, day!"

They reached the open; the gallop became a trot.

"I go north here," said Foy at the cross-roads above the town. "Which way for you?"

"North too," said Pringle. "I don't know just where, but you can tell me. I go to a railroad station first—Aden. Then to the Vorhis place?"

"Vorhis? I'm going there myself?" said Foy. "You didn't tell me your name yet."

"Pringle."

"What? Not John Wesley Pringle? Great Scott, man! I've heard Stella talk

about you a thousand times. Say, I'm sure glad to meet you! My name's Foy—Christopher Foy."

"Why, yes," said Pringle. "I think I've heard Stella speak of you, too."

Chapter III

BEING a child must have been great fun —once. Nowadays one would as lief be a Strasburg goose. When you and I went to school it was not quite so bad. True, neither of us could now extract a cube root with a stump puller, and it is sad to reflect how little call life has made for duodecimals. Sometimes it seems that all our struggle with moody verbs and insubordinate conjunctions was a wicked waste—poor little sleepy puzzleheads! But there were certain joyous facts which we remember yet. Lake Erie was very like a whale; Lake Ontario was a seal; and Italy was a boot.

The great Chihuahuan desert is a boot too; a larger boot than Italy. The leg of it is in Mexico, the toe is in Arizona, the heel in

New Mexico; and the Jornado is in the boot-heel.

El Jornado del Muerto—the Journey of the Dead Man! From what dim old legend has the name come down? No one knows. The name has outlived the story.

Perhaps some grim, hard-riding Spaniard made his last ride here; weary at last of war, turned his dead face back to Spain and the pleasant valleys of his childhood. We have a glimpse of him, small in the mighty silence; his faithful few about him, with fearful backward glances; a gray sea of waving grama breaking at their feet; the great mountains looking down on them. Plymouth Rock is unnamed yet.—Then the mist shuts down.

The Santa Fé Trail reaches across the Jornado; tradition tells of vague, wild battles with Apache and Navajo; there are grave-cairns on lone dim ridges, whereon

each passer casts a stone. Young mothers dreamed over the cradles of those who now sleep here, undreaming; here is the end of all dreams.

Doniphan passed this way; Kit Carson rode here; the Texans journeyed north along that old road in '62—to return no more.

These were but passers-by. The history of the Jornado, of indwellers named and known, begins with six Americans, as follows: Sandoval, a Mexican; Toussaint, a Frenchman; Fest, a German; Martin, a German; Roullier, a Swiss; and Teagardner, a Welshman.

You might have thought the Jornado a vast and savage waste or a pleasant place and a various. That depended upon you. Materials for either opinion were plenty; lava flow, saccaton flats, rolling sand hills sagebrush, mesquite and yucca, bunch grass and shallow lakes, bench and hill, ridge and groundswell and wandering draw; always the

great mountains round about; the mountains and the warm sun over all.

A certain rich man desired to be President—to please his wife, perhaps. He was a favorite son sure of his home-state vote in any grand old national convention. He gave largely to charities and campaign funds, and his left hand would have been justly astonished to know what his right hand was about.

Those were bargain-counter days. Fumbling the wares, our candidate saw, among other things, that New Mexico had six conventional votes. He sent after them.

So the Bar Cross Cattle Company was founded; range, the Jornado. Our candidate provided the money and a manager, also ambidextrous with instructions to get those votes and incidentally to double the money, as a good and faithful manager should.

He got the six votes, but our candidate never became president. Poor fellow, his

millions could not bring him happiness. He died, an embittered and disappointed man, in the obscurity of the United States Senate.

The Bar Cross brand was the sole fruit of that ambition. Other ranches had dwindled or vanished; favored by environment the Bar Cross, almost alone, withstood the devastating march of progress. It was still a mark of distinction to be a Bar Cross man. The good old customs—and certain bad old customs, too—still held on the Bar Cross Range, fifty miles by one hundred, on the Jornado. Scattered here and there were smaller ranches: among them the V H—the Vorhis Ranch.

Stella Vorhis and John Wesley, far out on the plain, rode through the pleasant afternoon. The V H. Ranch was in sight now, huddled low before them; beyond, a cluster of low hills rose from the plain, visible center of a world fresh, eager, and boundless.

The girl's eye kindled with delight as it sought the far horizons, the misty parapets gleaming up through the golden air; she was one who found dear and beautiful this gray land, silent and ensunned. She flung up her hand exultingly.

"Isn't it wonderful, John Wesley? Do you know what it makes me think of? This:

"' . . . Magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faëry lands forlorn!'

"Think, John! This country hasn't changed a bit since the day Columbus set out from Spain."

"How true! Fine old bird, Columbus—he saw America first. Great head he showed, too, getting himself named Christopher. Otherwise you might have said, 'the day Antony discovered Cleopatra'—or something like that. Wise old Chris!"

Stella's eyes narrowed reflectively.

"John Wesley, you've been reading! You never used to know anything about Mark Antony."

"I cribbed that remark from Billy Beebe and he swiped it from a magazine. I don't know much about Mark, even this very yet. Good old easy Mark!"

"That's the how of it. You've been absorbing knowledge from those pardners of yours. Your talk shows it. You're changed a lot—that way. Every other way you're the same old Wes!"

"Now, that sounds better!" said Pringle in his most complacent tones. "I want to talk about myself, always, Stella May Vorhis; we've come thirty miles and I've heard Christopher Foy, Foy, Foy, all the way! It's exasperating! It's sickening!"

But Stella was not to be flustered. She held her head proudly.

"It's you that have been talking about

him. I told you you'd like him, John Wesley."

"Yes, you did—and I do. He's a self-starter. He's a peppermist. He's a regular guy. It wasn't only the way he smashed those thugs—taken by surprise and all—but that he had judgment enough not to shoot when there was no need for it; that's what gets me! And then he went and spoiled it all."

"How?"

"Hiking on up to the ranch with the Major, without even waking you up. Why, if it was me, do you s'pose I'd leave another man—no matter how old and safe he was—to tell such a story as that his own way and hog all the credit for himself? That Las Uvas push is a four-flush—he needn't stir a peg for them. No, sir! I'd have stayed right there till you got ready to come—and every time I'd narrate that tale about the

scrap it would get scarier and scarier."

"I know, without telling, what my Chris does is the brave thing, the best thing," said the girl, with softly shining eyes. "And he never brags—any more than you do, Wes. You're always making fun of yourself. And I'm afraid you don't know how serious a menace this Las Uvas gang is. It isn't what Chris may do or may not do. All they want is a pretext. Why, John, there are men down there who are really quite truthful—as men go—till they get on the witness stand. But the minute they're under oath they begin to lie. Force of habit, I guess. The whole courthouse ring hates Chris and fears him—especially Matt Lisner, the sheriff. In the old trouble, whenever he was outwitted or outfought, Chris did it. Besides——" She paused; the color swept to her cheek.

"Besides—you. Yes, yes," grumbled Pringle. "Might have been expected.

These women! Does the Foy-boy know?"

"He knows that Lisner wanted to marry me," said Stella. Neck and cheek were crimson now; but it was characteristic that her level eyes met Pringle's fearlessly. "But before that—he—he persecuted me, John. Chris must not know. He would kill him. But I wanted you to know in case anything happened to Chris. There is nothing they will stick at, these men. Lisner is the vilest; he hates Chris worst of all." She was in deep distress; there were tears in her eyes as she smiled at him. "And I wish—oh, John Wesley, you don't know how I wish you were staying here—dear old friend!"

"As a dear and highly valuable old friend," said Pringle sedately, "let me point out how shrewd and sensible a plan it would be for you and your Chris to go on a honeymoon at once—and never come back."

"I am beginning to think so. Up to last night I had only my fears to go on."

"But now you know. We managed to make a joke of last night—but what that push had in mind was plain murder. I would dearly like," said John Wesley, "to visit Las Uvas—some dark night—in a Zeppelin."

At the corral gate the Major met them, with a face so troubled that Stella cried out in alarm:

"Father! What is it? Chris?"

"Stella—be brave! Dick Marr was killed at midnight—and they're swearing it off on Chris."

"But John Wesley was with him."

"That's just it. Applegate and Creagan tell it that they saw Chris leaving town at eleven o'clock, that he said he was coming up here, and that he made a war-talk about Marr. But not a word about Pringle or the

fight at the hotel. Joe Espalin doesn't appear—no claim that he saw Foy at all."

"That looks ugly," observed Pringle.

"Ugly! Your testimony is to be thrown out as a lie made of whole cloth. Espalin and the barkeeper don't appear. They're afraid the Mexican will get tangled up, and Max will swear he didn't see Chris at all. It's cut and dried. You are to be canceled. Marr was found this morning at the first crossroad above town. His watch was stopped at ten minutes to twelve—mashed, it seemed, where it hit on a stone when he fell. If they had told about the mix-up with you and Chris last night, I might have thought they really believed Chris killed Marr—or suspected it. As it stands, we know the whole thing is a black, rotten conspiracy."

"But where's Chris?" demanded Stella, trembling.

"We have none of us seen Chris—you

want to remember that. You won't have to lie, Stella—you didn't see him. Pringle, I bank on you."

"Sure! I can lie and stick to it, though I'm sadly out of practice," said Pringle. "But hadn't we better fix up the same history to tell? And where's your man Hargis that stays here? Will he do?"

"Unsaddle and I'll tell you. We've only got a few minutes. I saw the dust of them coming down from the north as I drove in this bunch of saddle horses. Some of them went up by train to Upham, you know. Hargis has gone to the round-up, and I'm just as well pleased. I'm not sure he can be trusted. We are to know not the first word of what has happened. We haven't seen Chris and haven't heard of the murder. Come in—we'll start dinner and be taken by surprise. Pringle, throw your gun over on the bunk. Stella, get that look off your face.

After you hear the news you can look any old way and it'll be natural enough. But you've got to be unconcerned and unsuspicious when they first come."

He started a fire. Stella set about preparing dinner.

"Who brought the news?" she asked.

"Joe Cowan—and a relay. Someone rode to Jeff Isaack's ranch as fast as ever a horse could go. Jeff came to Quartzite; Dodd passed the word on to Goldenburg's and Cowan came here. At every ranch they drove all the fresh saddle horses out of the way, so a posse couldn't get a remount without losing time. Kitty Foy has got good friends, and they don't believe he'd shoot any man in the back."

"And Foy's drifted with Cowan?"

"He hadn't a chance to get clear," said the Major. "We had no fresh horses here. They've sworn in a small army of deputies.

Nearly a hundred men are out hunting for him by this time. One posse was to go up the San Andres on the east, leaving a man at every waterhole. The sheriff wired for a special train, took a carload of saddle horses and dropped a couple of men off at every station. At Upham the rest of them were to unload and string out across the Jornado, so as to cut Chris off from the Bar Cross round-up at Alaman. It's some of that bunch I saw coming, I guess. And the others were to scatter out and come up the middle of the plain. They'll drag the Jornado with a fine-toothed comb."

"How's he to get away, then?"

"Cowan took Kit's horse and led his own, which was about give out. He turned back east, up a draw where he won't be seen unless somebody's right on top of him. Eight or ten miles out he'll turn Foy's horse loose; he'll carry the extra saddle on a ways and

drop it in a washout. They'll find Foy's horse and think he's roped a fresh one. Then Cowan will start up a fresh bunch of mares and raise big dust. He will ride straight to the first posse he sees, claiming he's run his horse down chasing the mares. That'll let him out—maybe."

"And Foy?"

"We rode my horse double to the edge of the hills, to where he could walk on a ledge and leave no tracks," said the Major. "Then I went on. I rounded up this bunch of saddle horses and brought them back. He went up on Little Thumb Butte. It's all bluffs and bowlders there. Up on the highest big cliff, at the very top, is a deep crack that winds up in a cave like a tunnel. You know the place, Stella?"

"Yes. But, dad, they'll hunt out the hills the first thing."

"They will not!" said the Major trium-

phantly. "They'll read our sign; they'll see where four shod horses came up the road. I'll claim one of them was a horse I was leading—that'll be that bald-faced roan out in the corral. We all want to stick to that."

"But he's bigger than any of our horses," objected Pringle. "They'll know better by the tracks."

"Exactly! So they'll find a fresh-shod track going east—a track matching the fourth track we left on the road. They'll reason that we're trying to keep them from following that track. So they'll follow it up; they'll find Kit's give-out horse and then they'll know they're right."

"It seems to me," said Pringle reflectively, "that friend Cowan may have an interesting time if they get him."

The Major permitted himself a grin.

"He yanked the shoes off his horse before he left. Once he mixes his tracks up with a

bunch of wild mares he'll be all right. They may think, but they can't prove anything. And Foy'll be all right—if only the posse follows the plain trail."

"It's too much to hope," said Stella. "They'll split up. Some of them will hunt out the hills anyway—to-morrow, if not to-day."

"That's my idea of it," said Pringle.

"They won't find the cave if they do," said Vorhis hopefully. "If he can get to the Bar Cross they'll see him through, once they hear his story. Not telling about that clean-up you and Kit made last night is a dead give-away."

"Any chance of Foy slipping out afoot?"

"Too far. But he could stand a siege till we could get word to his friends if, by any chance, the posse should find his cave. He took my rifle. He can see them coming; he'll have every advantage against attack; and

there's another way out of the cave, up on top of the hill. There's just one thing against him. There wasn't even a canteen here. He took some jerky and canned stuff—but only one measly beer bottle of water. When that's used up it's going to be a dull time for him. We can't get water to him very handy without leaving some sign. We mustn't get hostile with the posse. Take it easy—you especially, Pringle. Stella and me, they know where we stand. But you're a stranger. Maybe they'll let you go on. If you once get away—bring the Bar Cross boys and they'll take Foy out of here in broad day."

"Very pretty—but there's four men in Las Uvas that know me—and three of them are police. Maybe they'll stay in the city though—being police?"

"No, they won't," said the Major gloomily. "They'll be along—deputized, of course. Maybe they won't be in the first

batch though. Your part is to be the disinterested traveler, wanting to be on your way."

"It won't work, Major. This is a put-up job. Even if Applegate and his strikers aren't along they've given my description. Somebody will know I was with Foy last night, and they'll know I'm lying."

The Major sighed. "That's so, too. I'm afraid you're in for trouble."

"I'm used to that," said Pringle lightly. "Once, in Arizona——"

"Don't throw it up to me, John," said the Major a trifle sheepishly. "I'll say this though: I wouldn't ask for a better man in a tight than you."

"Thanks so much!" murmured Pringle. "And that Sir Hubert Stanley thing."

"One more point, John: You don't know Foy. I do. Foy'll never give up. He's desperate—and he's not pleased. There's no

question of surrender and standing trial; understand that. He'd be lynched, probably, if they ever got him in Las Uvas. A trial, even, would be just lynching under another name. They don't want to capture him anyway—they want a chance to kill him."

"I wouldn't want the job," said Pringle.

"Hush!" said Stella. "I hear them coming. Talk about something else—the war in Europe."

The Major picked up a paper.

"What do you think about the United States building a big navy, John?" he asked casually.

Stealthy footsteps rustled without.

"Fine!" said Pringle. "I'm strong for it, We want dreadnoughts, and lots of 'em—biggest we can build. But that ain't all. When we make the navy appropriations we ought to set by about fifty-some-odd million and build a big multiple-track railroad, so we

can carry our navy inland in case of war. The ocean is no place for a battleship these days."

"Stop your kidding!"

"I'm not kidding," said John Wesley indignantly. "I never was twice as serious in my whole life. My plan is sound, statesmanlike——"

"Shut up, you idiot! I want to read."

"Oh, very well, then! I'll grind the coffee."

Men crept close to the open door on each side of the kitchen. Stella slipped a pan of biscuits in the oven; she laid the table briskly, with a merry clatter of tinware; her face was cheerful and unclouded. The Major leaned back in one chair, his feet on another; he was deep in the paper; he puffed his pipe. John Wesley Pringle twirled the coffee mill between his knees and sang a merry tune:

"There were three little mice, playing in the barn—
Inky, dinky, doodum, day!
Though they knew they were doing what was very, very wrong—
Inky, dinky, doodum, day!
And the song of the owls, it sounded so nice
That closer and closer crept the three little mice.
And the owls came and gobbled them ——"

A shadow fell across the floor.

"Hands up!" said the sheriff of Dona Ana. "We want Chris Foy!"

Chapter IV

NAVAJO, Pima, and Hopi enjoy seven cardinal points—north, east, west, south, up, down, and right here. In these and any intermediate directions from the Vorhis Ranch the diligent posse comitatus made swift and jealous search through the slow hours of afternoon. It commandeered the V H Saddle horses in the corral; it searched for sign in the soft earth of the wandering draws between the dozen low hills scattered round Big Thumb Butte and Little Thumb Butte; it rode circles round the ranch; the sign of Christopher Foy's shod horse was found and followed hotfoot by a detachment. Eight men had arrived in the first bunch, with the sheriff; others from every angle joined by twos and threes from hour to hour till the

number rose to above a score. A hasty election provided a protesting cook and a horse wrangler; a V H beef was slaughtered.

The posse was rather equally divided between two classes—simpletons and fools. The first unquestionably believed Foy to be a base and cowardly murderer, out of law, whom it were most righteous to harry; else, as the storied juryman put it, "How came he there?" The other party were of those who hold that evildoing may permanently prosper and endure.

In the big living room of the adobe ranch house much time had been wasted in cross-questions and foolish answers. Stella Vorhis had been banished to her own room and Sheriff Matt Lisner had privately told off a man to make sure she did not escape.

Lisner and Ben Creagan, crossest of the four examiners, had been prepared to meet by crushing denial an eager and indignant

statement from Pringle, adducing the Gadsden House affair and his subsequent companying with Foy as proof positive of Foy's innocence. That no such accusation came from Pringle set these able but mystified deniers entirely at a loss, left the denial high and dry. Creagan mopped his brow furtively.

"Vorhis," said Sheriff Matt, red and angry from an hour's endeavor, "I think you're telling a pack of lies—every word of it. You know mighty well where Foy is."

The Major's gray goatee quivered.

"Guess I'll tell you lies if I want to," he retorted defiantly.

"But, Sheriff, he may be telling us the truth," urged Paul Breslin. "Foy may very well have ridden here alone before Vorhis got here. I've known the Major a long time. He isn't the man to protect a red-handed murderer."

"Aw, bah! How do you know I won't? How do you know he's a murderer? You make me sick!" declared the Major hotly. Breslin was an honest, well-meaning farmer; the Major was furious to find such a man allied with Foy's foes—certain sign that other decent blockheads would do likewise. "Matt Lisner tells you Kit Foy is a murderer and you believe him implicitly: Matt Lisner tells you I'm a liar—but you stumble at that. Why? Because you think about me—that's why! Why don't you try that plan about Foy —thinking?"

"But Foy's run away," stammered Breslin, disconcerted.

"Run away, hell! He's not here, you mean. According to your precious story, Foy was leaving before Marr was killed—or before you say Marr was killed. Why don't you look for him with the Bar Cross round-up? There's where he started for, you say?"

"I wired up and had a trusty man go out there quietly at once. He's staying there still —quietly," said the sheriff. "Foy isn't there —and the Bar Cross hasn't heard of the killing yet. It won't do, Major. Foy's run away."

John Wesley Pringle, limp, slack, and rumpled in his chair, yawned, stretching his arms wide.

"This man Foy," he ventured amiably, "if he really run away, he done a wise little stunt for himself, I think. Because every little ever and anon, thin scraps of talk float in from your cookfire in the yard—and there's a heap of it about ropes and lynching, for instance. If he hasn't run away yet, he'd better—and I'll tell him so if I see him. Stubby, red-faced, spindlin', thickset, jolly little man, ain't he? Heavy-complected, broad-shouldered, dark blond, very tall and slender, weighs about a hundred and ninety, with a

pale skin and a hollow-cheeked, plump, serious face?"

At this ill-timed and unthinkable levity Breslin stared in bewilderment; Lisner glared, gripping his fist convulsively; and Mr. Ben Creagan, an uneasy third inquisitor, breathed hard through his nose. Anastacio Barela, the fourth and last inquisitor, maintained unmoved the disinterested attitude he had held since the interrogation began. Feet crossed, he lounged in his chair, graceful, silent, smoking, listening, idly observant of wall and ceiling.

No answer being forthcoming to his query Pringle launched another:

"Speaking of faces, Creagan, old sport, what's happened to you and your nose? You look like someone had spread you on the minutes." He eyed Creagan with solicitous interest.

Mr. Creagan's battered face betrayed emo-

tion. Pringle's shameless mendacity shocked him. But it was Creagan's sorry plight that he must affect never to have seen this insolent Pringle before. The sheriff's face mottled with wrath. Pringle reflected swiftly: The sheriff's rage hinted strongly that he was in Creagan's confidence and hence was no stranger to last night's mishap at the hotel; their silence proclaimed their treacherous intent.

On the other hand, these two, if not the others, knew very well that Pringle had left town with Foy and had probably stayed with him; that the Major must know all that Foy and Pringle knew. Evidently, Pringle decided, these two, at least, could expect no direct information from their persistent questionings; what they hoped for was unconscious betrayal by some slip of the tongue. As for young Breslin, Pringle had long since sized him up for what the Major knew him to be—a good-hearted, right-meaning simple-

ton. In the indifferent-seeming Anastacio, Pringle recognized an unknown quantity.

That, for a certainty, Christopher Foy had not killed Marr, was a positive bit of knowledge which Pringle shared only with the murderer himself and with that murderer's accomplices, if any. So much was plain, and Pringle felt a curiosity, perhaps pardonable, as to who the murderer really was.

Duty and inclination thus happily wedded, Pringle set himself to goad ferret-eyed Creagan and the heavy-jawed sheriff into unwise speech. And inattentive Anastacio had a shrewd surmise at Pringle's design. He knew nothing of the fight at the Gadsden House, but he sensed an unexplained tension—and he knew his chief.

"And this man, too—what about him?" said Breslin, regarding Pringle with a puzzled face. "Granted that the Major might have a motive for shielding Foy—he may

even believe Foy to be innocent—why should this stranger put himself in danger for Foy?"

"Here, now—none of that!" said Pringle with some asperity. "I may be a stranger to you, but I'm an old friend of the Major's. I'm his guest, eating his grub and drinking his baccy; if he sees fit to tell any lies I back him up, of course. Haven't you got any principle at all? What do you think I am?"

"I know what you are," said the sheriff. "You're a damned liar!"

"An amateur only," said Pringle modestly. "I never take money for it." He put by a wisp of his frosted hair, the better to scrutinize, with insulting slowness, the sheriff's savage face. "Your ears are very large!" he murmured at last. "And red!"

The sheriff leaped up.

"You insolent cur-dog!" he roared.

"'To stand and be still to the Birken'ead drill is a dam' tough bullet to chew,'" quoted

Pringle evenly. "But he done it—old Pringle—John Wesley Pringle—liar and cur-dog too! We'll discuss the cur-dog later. Now, about the liar. You're mighty certain, seems to me. Why? How do you know I'm lying? For I am lying—I'll not deceive you. I'm lying; you know I'm lying; I know that you know I'm lying: and you apprehend clearly that I am aware that you are cognizant of the fact that I am fully assured that you know I am lying. Just like that! What a very peculiar set of happenstances! I am a nervous woman and this makes my head go round!"

"The worst day's work you ever did for yourself," said the angry sheriff, "was when you butted into this business."

"Yes, yes; go on. Was this to-day or yesterday—at the hotel?"

"Liar!" roared Lisner. "You never were at the Gadsden House."

"Who said I was?"

The words cracked like a whiplash. Simultaneously Pringle's tilted chair came down to its four legs and Pringle sat poised, his weight on the balls of his feet, ready for a spring. The sheriff paused midway of a step; his mottled face grew ashen. A gurgle very like a smothered chuckle came from Anastacio. Creagan flung himself into the breach.

"Aw, Matt, let's have the girl in here. We can't get nothing from these stiff-necked idiots."

"Might as well," agreed Lisner in a tone that tried to be contemptuous but trembled. "We're wasting time here."

"Lisner," said the Major in his gentlest tone, "be well advised and leave my daughter be."

"And if I don't?" sneered Lisner. He had no real desire to question Stella, but wel-

comed the change of venue as a diversion from his late indiscretion. "If, in the performance of my duty, I put a few civil questions to Miss Vorhis—in the presence of her father, mind you—then what?"

"But you won't!" said the Major softly.

"Do you know, Sheriff, I think the Major has the right idea?" said Pringle. "We won't bother the young lady."

"Who's going to stop me?"

Anastacio, in his turn, brought his chair to the floor, at the same time unclasping his hands from behind his head.

"I'll do that little thing, Sheriff," he announced mildly. "Miss Vorhis has already told us that she has not seen Foy since yesterday noon. That is quite sufficient."

Silence.

"This makes me fidgety. Somebody say something, quick—anything!" begged Pringle. "All right, then; I will. Let's go back

—we've dropped a stitch. That goes about me being a liar and a damned one, Sheriff; but I'm hurt to have you think I'm a cur-dog. You're the sheriff, doin' your duty, as you so aptly observed. And you've done took my gun away. But if bein' a cur-dog should happen to vex me—honest, Sheriff, I'm that sensitive that I'll tell you now—not hissing or gritting or gnashing my teeth—just telling you—the first time I meet you in a strictly private and unofficial way I'm goin' to remold you closer to my heart's desire!"

"You brazen hussy! You know you lied!"

"You're still harpin' on that, Sheriff? That doesn't make it any easier to be a cur-dog. How did you know I lied? You say so, mighty positive—but what are your reasons? Why don't you tell your associates? There is an honest man in this room. I am not sure there are not two——"

Anastacio's eyes again removed themselves from the ceiling.

"If you mean me—and somehow I am quite clear as to that——"

"I mean Mr. Breslin."

"Oh, him—of course!" said Anastacio in a shocked voice. "Breslin, by all means, for the one you were sure of. But the second man, the one you had hopes of—who should that be but me? I thank you. I am touched. I am myself indifferent honest, as Shakespere puts it."

The sheriff licked his dry lips.

"If you think I am going to stay here to be insulted——"

"You are!" taunted John Wesley Pringle. "You'll stay right here. What? Leave me here to tell what I have to say to an honest man and a half? Impossible! You'll not let me out of your sight."

"My amateur Ananias," interrupted Ana-

stacio dispassionately, "you are, unintentionally, perhaps, doing me half of a grave injustice. In this particular instance—for this day and date only—I am as pure as a new-mown hay. To prevent all misapprehension let me say now that I never thought Foy killed Dick Marr."

"In heaven's name, why?" demanded Breslin.

"My honest but thick-skulled friend, let me put in my oar," implored the Major. "Let me show you that Matt Lisner never thought Foy was guilty. Foy said last night, before the killing, that he was coming up here, didn't he?"

"Hey, Major—hold up!" cried Pringle. But Vorhis was not to be stopped.

"Don't you see, you doddering imbecile? If Foy had really killed Dick Marr he might have gone to any other place in the world—but he wouldn't have come here."

"Aha! So Foy did come here, hey?" croaked the sheriff, triumphant in his turn. "Thanks, Major, for the information, though I was sure before, humanly speaking, that he came this way."

"Which is another way of saying that you don't think Foy did the killing—that you don't even suspect him of it," said Anastacio. as the Major subsided, crestfallen. "Matt Lisner, I know that you hate Foy. I know that you welcome this chance to get rid of him. Make no mistake, Breslin. I was not wanted here. I wasn't asked and none of my people were brought along. I tagged along, though—to wait. It's one of the best little things I do—waiting. And I came to protect Foy, not to capture him. I came to keep right at his side, in case he surrendered without a fight—for fear he might be killed . . . escaping . . . on the way back. It's a way that we have in Las Uvas!"

Lisner threw a look of hate at his deputy.

"You don't mean to tell me there's any danger of anything like that?" said Breslin, staggered and aghast.

"Every danger. That's an old gag—the *ley fuga.*"

"You lie!" bawled Creagan. His six-shooter covered Anastacio.

"That'll keep. Put up your gun, Bennie," said Anastacio with great composure. "Supper's most ready. Besides, the Barelas won't like it if you shoot me this way. There's a lot of the Barelas, Ben. I'll tell you what I'll do, though—I'll slip the idea to my crowd, and any time you want to kill me on an even break, no Barela or Ascarate will take it up. Put it right in your little holster—put it up, I say! That's right. You see, Breslin? Don't let Foy out of your sight if he should be taken."

"But he'll never let himself be taken

alive," said Vorhis. "Even if anyone wants to take him—alive. Pass the word to your friends, Breslin, unless you want them to take part in a deliberate, foreplanned murder."

"Damn you, what do you mean?" shouted the sheriff.

"By God, sir, I mean just what I say!"

"Why, girls!" said Pringle. "You shock me! This is most unladylike. This is scandalous talk. Be nice! Please—pretty please! See, here comes some more pussyfoot posse—three, six, eleven hungry men. Have they got Foy? No; they have not got Foy. Is he up? He is up. Look who's here too! Good old Applegate and Brother Espalin. I wonder now if they're goin' to give me the cut direct, like Creagan did? You notice, Mr. Breslin."

The horsemen rode into the corral.

"No; don't go, Sheriff," said Anastacio. "I'm anxious to see if those two will recog-

nize Ananias the Amateur. They'll be here directly. You, either, Creagan. Else I'll shoot you both in the back, accidentally, cleaning my gun."

From without was the sound of spurred feet in haste; three men appeared at the open door.

"Why, if it ain't George! Good old George!" cried Pringle, rising with outstretched arms. "And my dear friend Espalin! What a charming reunion!"

Applegate's eyes threw a startled question at his chief and at Creagan; Espalin slipped swiftly back through the door.

"I don't know you, sir," said Applegate.

"George! You're never going to disown me! Joe's gone, too. Nobody loves me!"

The third man, a grizzled and bristly old warrior with a limp, broke in with a roar.

"What in hell's going on here?" he stormed.

"You are, for one thing, if you don't moderate your voice," said Anastacio. "Nueces, you bellow like the bulls of Bashan. Mr. Applegate, meet Mr. Pringle."

"What does he mean, then, by such monkeyshines?" demanded the other—old Nueces River, chief of police, ex-ranger, and, for this occasion, deputy sheriff. "I got no time for foolishness. And you can't run no whizzer on me, Barela. Don't you try it!"

"Oh, they're just joking, Nueces," said the Major. "Tell us how about it. Here, I'll light the lamp; it's getting dark. Find any sign of Foy?"

Nueces leveled a belligerent finger at the Major.

"You've been joking, too! I've heard about you. Lisner, I'm ashamed of you! Let Vorhis pull the wool over your eyes, while you sit here and jaw all afternoon, doing nothing!"

"Why, what did you find out?"

"A-plenty. Them stiffs you sent out found Foy's horse, to begin with."

"Sure it was Foy's horse?" queried Lisner eagerly.

"Sure! I know the horse—that big calico horse of his."

"Why didn't you follow him up?"

"Follow hell! Oh, some of the silly fools are milling round out there—going over to the San Andres to-night to take a big hunt mañana. Not me. That horse was a blind. They pottered round tryin' to find some trace of Foy—blind fools!—till I met up with 'em. I'd done gathered in that mizzable red-headed Joe Cowan on a give-out horse, claimin' he'd been chousin' after broom-tails. He'd planted Foy's horse, I reckon. But it can't be proved, so I let him go. He'll have to walk in; that's one good thing."

"But Foy—where do you figure Foy's gone?"

"Maybe he simply was not," suggested Pringle, "like Enoch when he was translated into all European languages, including the Scandinavian."

"Pringle, if you say another word I'll have you gagged!" said the exasperated sheriff. "Don't you reckon, Nueces, that Cowan brought Foy a barefooted horse? He can't have gone on afoot or you'd have seen his tracks."

"Sheriff, you certainly are an easy mark!" returned Nueces, in great disgust. "Foy didn't go on afoot or horseback, because he was never there. I've told you twice: Cowan left that calico horse on purpose for us to find. Vorhis is Foy's friend. Can't you see, if Foy had tried to get away by hard riding he would have had a fresh horse, not the one he rode from Las Uvas, and you wouldn't

have found a penful of fresh horses to chase him with? Not in a thousand years! That was to make it nice and easy for you to ride on—a six-year-old kid could see through it! It's a wonder you didn't all fall for it and chase away. No, sir! Foy either stopped down on the river and sent his horse on to fool us—or, more likely, he's up in the Buttes. Did you look there?"

"I sent the boys round to out sign. I didn't feel justified in hunting out the rough places till we had more men. Too much cover for him."

"And none for you, I s'pose? Mamma! but you're a fine sheriff! Look now: After we started back here we sighted a dust comin' 'way up north. We went over, and 'twas Hargis, the Major's buckaroo, throwin' in a bunch from the round-up. He didn't know nothin' and was not right sure of that—till I mentioned your reward. Soon as ever I men-

tioned twenty-five hundred, he loosened up right smart."

"Well? Did he know where Foy was?"

"No; but he knew of the place where I judge Foy is, this very yet. Gosh!" said Nueces River in deep disgust, "it beats hell what men will do for a little dirty money! Seems there's a cave near the top of the least of them two buttes—the roughest one—a cave with two mouths, one right on the big top. Nobody much knows where it is, only the V H outfit."

Pringle had edged across the room. He now plucked at Bell Applegate's sleeve.

"Say, is that right about that reward—twenty-five hundred?" he whispered. His eyes glistened.

"Forty-five," said Bell behind his hand. "The Masons, they put up a thousand, and Dick's old uncle—that would have let Dick starve or work—he tacked on a thousand

more. Dead or alive!" He looked down at Pringle's face, at Pringle's working fingers, opening and shutting avariciously; he sneered. "Don't you wish you may get it? S-sh! Hear what the old man's saying."

During the whispered colloquy the old ranger had kept on:

"There's where he is, a twenty-to-one shot! He'll lay quiet, likely, thinkin' we'll miss him. Brush growin' over both the cave mouths, Hargis says, so you might pass right by if you didn't know where to look. These short nights he couldn't never get clear on foot. Thirty mile to the next water—we'd find his tracks and catch him. But he might make a break to get away, at that. Never can tell about a he-man like that. We can't take no chances. We'll pick a bite of supper and then we surround that hill, quiet as mice, and close up on him. He can't see us to shoot if we're fool enough to make any noise.

Come daylight, we'll have him cornered, every man behind a bowlder. If he shows up he's our meat; if he don't we'll starve him out."

"And suppose he isn't there?" said Creagan. "What would we look like, watching an empty cave two or three days?"

"What do we look like now? Give you three guesses," retorted Nueces. "And how'd we look rushin' that empty cave if it didn't happen to be empty? Excuse me! I'd druther get three grand heehaws and a tiger for bein' ridiculous than to have folks tiptoe by a-whisperin': 'How natural he looks!' I been a pretty tough old bird in my day—but goin' up a tunnel after Kitty Foy ain't my idea of foresight."

"Some man—some good man, too—will have to stay here and stand guard on the Major and this fresh guy, Pringle," said the

sheriff thoughtfully. "He'll get his slice of the money, of course."

"You'll find a many glad to take that end of the job; for," said Nueces River, "it is in my wise old noddle some of us are going to be festerin' in Abraham's bosom before we earn that reward money. Leave Applegate—he's in bad shape for climbing anyway; bruise on his belly big as a washpan."

"Bronc' bucked me over on the saddle horn," explained Applegate. "Sure, I'll stay. And the Pringle person will be right here when you get back, too."

"Let the Major take some supper in to Miss Vorhis," suggested Breslin. "I'll keep an eye on him. He can eat with her and cheer her up a little. This is hard lines for a girl."

Lisner shrugged his shoulders.

"We have to keep her here till Foy's caught. She might bring a sight of trouble down on us."

"Say, what's the matter with me going out and eating a few?" asked Pringle.

"You stay here! You talk too much with your mouth," replied the sheriff. "I'll send in a snack for you and Bell. Come on, boys."

They filed out to the cook's fire in the walled courtyard.

"George, dear," said Pringle when the two were left alone, "is that right about the reward? 'Cause I sure want to get in on it."

"Damn likely. You knew where Foy was. You know where he is now. Why didn't you tell us, if you wanted in on the reward?"

"Why, George, I didn't know there was any reward. Besides, him and me split up as soon as we got clear of town."

"You're a damn liar!"

"That's what the sheriff said. Somebody must 'a' give me away," complained John Wesley. He rolled a cigarette and walked to

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the table. "All the same, you're making a mistake. You hadn't ought to roil me. Just for that, soon as they're all off on their man hunt, I'm goin' to study up some scheme to get away."

"I got a picture of you gettin' away!"

"George," said John Wesley, "you see that front door? Well, that's what we call in theatrical circles a practical door. Along toward morning I'm going out through that practical door. You'll see!"

He raised the lamp, held the cigarette over the chimney top and puffed till he got a light; so doing he smoked the chimney. To inspect the damage he raised the lamp higher. Swifter than thought he hurled it at his warder's head. The blazing lamp struck Applegate between the eyes. Pringle's fist flashed up and smote him grievously under the jaw; he fell crashing; the half-drawn gun clattered from his slackened fingers. Pringle caught it

up and plunged into the dark through the practical door.

He ran down the adobe wall of the water pen; a bullet whizzed by; he turned the corner; he whisked over the wall, back into the water pen. Shouts, curses, the sound of rushing feet without the wall. Pringle crouched in the deep shadow of the wall, groped his way to the long row of watering troughs, and wormed himself under the upper trough, where the creaking windmill and the splashing of water from the supply pipe would drown out the sound of his labored breath.

Horsemen boiled from the yard gate with uproar and hullabaloo; Pringle heard their shouts; he saw the glare of soap weeds, fired to help their search.

The lights died away; the shouts grew fainter: they swelled again as the searchers straggled back, vociferous. Pringle caught scraps of talk as they watered their horses.

"Clean getaway!"

"One bad actor, that *hombre!*"

"Regular Go-Getter!"

"Batting average about thirteen hundred, I should figger."

"Life-size he-man! Where do you suppose——"

"Saw a lad make just such another break once in Van Zandt County——"

"Say! Who're you crowdin'?"

"Hi, fellers! Bill's giving some more history of the state of Van Zandt!"

"Applegate's pretty bad hurt."

"——in a gopher hole and near broke my fool neck."

"Where'd this old geezer come from, anyway? Never heard of him before!"

"'Tain't fair, just when we was all crowdin' up for supper! He might have waited."

"This will be merry hell and repeat if he

hooks up with Foy," said Creagan's voice, adding a vivid description of Pringle.

Old Nueces answered, raising his voice:

"He's afoot. We got to beat him to it. Let's ride!"

"That's right," said the sheriff. "But we'll grab something to eat first. Saddle up, Hargis, and lead us to your little old cave. Robbins, while we snatch a bite you bunch what canteens we've got and fill 'em up. Then you watch the old man and that girl, and let Breslin come with us. You can eat after we've gone."

"Don't let the girl heave a pillow at you, Robbins!" warned a voice.

"Better not stop to eat," urged Nueces.

"We can lope up and get to the foot of Thumb Butte before Pringle gets halfway—if he's going there at all. Most likely he's had a hand in the Marr killing and is just running away to save his own precious

neck," said the sheriff. "We'll scatter out around the hill when we get to the roughs, and go up afoot till every man can see or hear his neighbor, so Pringle can't get through. Then we'll wait till daylight."

"That may suit you," retorted Nueces. "Me, I don't intend for any man that will buck a gun with a lamp to throw in with Kit Foy while I stuff my paunch. That sort is just the build to do a mile in nothing flat—and it's only three miles to the hill. I'm goin' now, and I'm goin' hellity-larrup! Come on, anybody with more brains than belly—I'm off to light a line of soap weeds on that hill so this Mr. Pringle-With-the-Punch don't walk himself by. If he wants up he'll have to hoof it around the other side of the hill. We won't make any light on the north side. That Bar Cross outfit is too damn inquisitive. The night herders would see it; they'd smell trouble; and like as not the whole bilin' of 'em

would come pryin' down here by daylight. Guess they haven't heard about Foy or they'd be here now. They're strong for Foy. Come on, you waddies!"

Mr. Pringle-With-the-Punch, squeezed, cramped, and muddy under the trough, heard this supperless plan with displeasure; his hope had been otherwise. He heard the sound of hurried mounting; from the thunder of galloping hoofs it would seem that a goodly number of the posse had come up to the specifications laid down by the old ranger.

The others clanked away, leaving their horses standing. The man Robbins grumbled from saddle to saddle and gathered canteens. As he filled them from the supply pipe directly above Mr. Pringle's head, he set them on the ground within easy reach of Mr. Pringle's hand. Acting on this hint Mr. Pringle's hand withdrew a canteen, quite unostentatiously. An unnecessary precaution, as

it turned out; Mr. Robbins, having filled that batch, went to the horses farther down the troughs to look for more canteens. So Pringle wriggled out with his canteen, selected a horse, and rode quietly through the open gate.

"Going already?" called Robbins as he passed.

Secure under cover of darkness, Pringle answered in the voice of one who, riding, eats:

"Yes, indeedy; I ain't no hawg. Wasn't much hungry nohow!"

Chapter V

AT the foot of Little Thumb Butte a lengthening semicircle of fire flared through the night. John Wesley Pringle swung far out on the plain to circle round it.

"This takes time," he muttered to himself, "but at least I know where not to go. That old rip-snorter sure put a spoke in my wheel! Looks like Foy might see them lights and drift out away from this. But he won't, I guess—they said his hidey-hole was right on top, and the shoulder of the hill will hide the fires from him. Probably asleep, anyhow, thinkin' he's safe. I slep' three hours this morning at the Major's; but Foy he didn't sleep any. Even if he did leave, they'd track him up in the morning and get him—

and he knows it. Somebody's goin' to be awfully annoyed when he misses this horse."

He could see the riders, dim-flitting as they passed between him and the flames. Once he stopped to listen; he heard the remaining half of the man-hunt leaving the ranch. They were riding hard. Thereafter Pringle had no mercy on his horse. Ride as he might, those who followed had the inner circle; when he rounded the fires and struck the hill his start was perilously slight. While the footing was soft he urged the wearied horse up the slope; at the first rocky space he abandoned the poor beast lest the floundering of shod hoofs should betray him. He took off saddle and bridle; he hung the canteen over his shoulder and pressed on afoot.

A light breeze had overcast the stars with thin and fleecy clouds. This made for Pringle's safety; it also made the going harder—

and it would have been hard going by daylight.

The slope became steeper; ledges of rock, little at first, became larger and more frequent; he came to bluffs that barred his progress, slow and painful at best; he was forced to search to left or right for broken places where he could climb. Bits of rock, dislodged by his feet, fell clattering despite his utmost care; he heard the like from below, to the left, to the right. The short night wore swiftly on.

With equal fortune John Wesley should have maintained his lead. But he found more than his share of no-thoroughfares. Before long his ears told him that men were almost abreast of him on each side. He was handicapped now, because he must shun any chance meeting. His immediate neighbors, however, had no such fear; they edged closer and closer together as they climbed. At last,

stopped against a perpendicular wall ten feet high, he heard them creeping toward him from both sides, with a guarded "Coo-ee!" each to the other; John Wesley slipped down the hill to the nearest bush. His neighbors came together and held a whispered discourse. They viewed the barrier with marked patience, it seemed; they sat down in friendly fashion and smoked cigarette after cigarette; the hum of their hushed voices reached Pringle, murmuring and indistinct. It might almost be thought that they were willing for others to precede them in the place of honor. A faint glow showed in the east; the moon had thoughts of rising.

After an interminable half-hour the two worthies passed on to the right. Pringle took to the left, more swiftly. Time for caution had passed; moonlight might betray him. When he found a way up that unlucky wall

others of the search party farther to the left were well beyond him.

Perhaps a quarter of a mile away, the last sheer cliff, the Thumb which gave the hill its name, frowned above him, a hundred feet from base to crest. Pringle bore obliquely up to the right. Speed was his best safety now; he pushed on boldly, cheered by the thought that if seen by any of the posse he would be taken for one of their own number. But Foy, seeing him, would make the same mistake! It was an uncomfortable reflection.

The pitch was less abrupt now, and there were no more ledges; instead, bowlders were strewn along the rounded slope, with bush and stunted tree between. Through these Pringle breasted his way, seeking even more to protect himself from above than from below, forced at times to crawl through an open space exposed to possible fire from both sides;

so came at last to the masses of splintered and broken rock at the foot of the cliff, where he sank breathless and panting.

The tethered constellations paled in the sky; the moon rose and lit the cliff with silver fire. The worst was yet to come. Foy would ask no questions of any prowler, that was sure; he would reason that a friend would call out boldly. And John Wesley had no idea where Foy or his cave might be. Yet he must be found.

With a hearty swig at the canteen Pringle crept off to the right. The moonlight beat full upon the cliff. He had little trouble in that ruin of broken stone to find cover from foes below; but at each turn he confidently looked forward to a bullet from his friend.

"Foy! Foy!" he called softly as he crawled. "It's Pringle! Don't shoot!"

After a space he came to an angle where the cliff turned abruptly west and dwindled

sharply in height. He remembered what the Major had said—the upper entrance of the cave came out on the highest crest of the hill. He turned back to retrace his painful way. The smell of dawn was in the air; the east sparkled. No sound came from the ambush all around. The end was near.

He passed by his starting-point; he crept on by slide and bush and stone. The moon magic faded and paled, mingled with the swift gray of dawn. He held his perilous way. Cold sweat stood on his brow. If Foy or a foe of Foy were on the cliff now, how easy to topple down a stone upon him! The absolute stillness was painful. A thought came to him of Stella Vorhis—her laughing eyes, her misty hair, the little hand that had lingered upon his own. Such a little, little hand!

Before him a narrow slit opened in the

wall—such a crevice as the Major had described.

"Foy! Oh, Foy!" he called. No answer came. He raised his voice a little louder. "Foy! Speak if you're there! It's Pringle!"

A gentle voice answered from the cleft:

"Let us hope, for your sake, that you are not mistaken about that. I should be dreadfully vexed if you were deceiving me. The voice is the voice of Pringle, but how about the face? I can only see your back."

"I would raise my head, so you could take a nice look by the well-known cold gray light of the justly celebrated dawn," rejoined Pringle, "if I wasn't reasonably sure that a rifle shot would promptly mar the classic outlines of my face. They're all around you, Foy. Hargis, he gave you away. Don't show a finger nail of yourself. Let me crawl up be-

hind that big rock ahead and then you can identify me."

"It's you, all right," said Foy when Pringle reached the rock and straightened himself up.

"I told you so," said Pringle, peering into the shadows of the cleft. "I can't see you. And how am I going to get to you? There are twenty men with point-blank range. I'm muddy, scratched, bruised, tired and hungry, sleepy and cross—and there's thirty feet in the open between here and you, and it nearly broad daylight. If I try to cross that I'll run twenty-five hundred pounds to the ton, pure lead. Well, we can put up a pretty nifty fight, even so. You go back to the other outlet of your cave and I'll stay here. I'm kinder lonesome, too. . . . Toss me some cartridges first. I only got five. I left in a hurry. You got forty-fives?"

"Plenty. But you can't stay there.

They'll pot you from the top of the bluff, first off. Besides, you got a canteen, I see. You back up to that mountain mahogany bush, slip under it, and worm down through the rocks till you come to a little scrub-oak tree and a big granite bowlder. They'll give you shelter to cross the ridge into a deep ravine that leads here where I am. You'll be out of sight all the way up once you hit the ravine. I'd—I'd worm along pretty spry if I was you, going down as far as the scrub oak—say, about as swift as a rattlesnake strikes—and pray any little prayers you happen to remember. And say, Pringle, before you go . . . I'm rather obliged to you for coming up here; risking taking cold and all. If it'll cheer you up any I'll undertake that anyone getting you on the trip will think there's one gosh-awful echo here."

"S'long!" said Pringle.

He wriggled backward and disappeared.

Ten minutes later he writhed under the bush at Foy's feet.

"Never saw me!" he said. "But I'll always sleep in coils after this—always supposing we got any after this coming to us."

"One more crawl," said Foy, leading the way. "We'll go up on top. Regular fort up there. If we've got to die we'll die in the sun."

He stooped at what seemed the end of the passage and crawled out of sight under the low branches of a stunted cedar. Pringle followed and found himself in the pitch dark.

"Grab hold of my coat tail. I know my way, feeling the wall. Watch your step or you'll bark your shins."

The cave floor was smooth underfoot, except for scattered rocks; it rose and dipped, but the general trend was sharply upward.

"You're quite an institution, Pringle. You've made good Stella's word of you—the

best ever!" said Foy as they mounted. "But you can't do me any good, really. I'll enjoy your company, but I wish you hadn't come."

"That's all right. I always like to finish what I begin."

"Well," remarked Foy cheerfully, "I reckon we've reached the big finish, both of us. I don't see any way out. All they've got to do is to sit tight till we starve out for water. Wish you was out of it. It's going to be tough on Stella, losing her friend and —and me, both at once. How's she making out? Full of fight and hope to the last, I'll bet."

"They had me under herd; but she was wishing for the Bar Cross buddies to butt in, I believe. Reckon your sheriff-man guessed it. He had her under guard, too."

"Nice man, the sheriff! How'd you get away from your herder?"

"He don't just remember," said Pringle.

"Who was it?"

"Applegate. Dreadful absent-minded, Applegate is. Ouch! There went my other shin. Had any sleep?"

"Most all night. Something woke me up about two hours ago, and I kept on the look-out ever since."

"That was me, I guess. I had to step lively. They was crowding me."

"If the Bar Cross happened to get word," observed Foy thoughtfully, "we might stand some hack. But they won't. It's good-by, vain world, for ours! Say, in case a miracle happens for you, just make a memo about the sheriff being a nuisance, will you?"

"I'll tie a string on my finger. Anything else?"

"You might stick around and cheer Stella up a little. I'll do as much for you some-

time. I'm thinking she'll feel pretty bad at first. Here we are!"

A faint glimmer showed ahead. They crawled under low bushes and stumbled out, in what seemed at first a dazzle of light; into a small saucer-shaped plat of earth a few feet across, enclosed by an irregular oval made by great blocks of stone, man-high. Below, a succession of little cliffs fell away, stair fashion, to an exceeding high and narrow gap which separated Little Thumb Butte from its greater neighbor, Big Thumb Butte.

"Castle Craney Crow," smiled Foy with a proprietary wave of his hand. "Just right for our business, isn't it? Make yourself at home, while I take a peep around about." He bent to peer through bush and crack. "Nothing stirring," he announced. He leaned his rifle against a walling rock. "Let's have a look at that water."

He raised the canteen to his lips. Pringle

struck swift and hard to the tilted chin. Foy dropped like a poled bullock; his head struck heavily against the sharp corner of a rock. Pringle pounced on the stricken man. He threw Foy's sixshooter aside; he pulled Foy's wrists behind him and tied them tightly with a handkerchief. Then he rolled his captive over.

Foy's eyes opened; they rolled back till only the whites were visible; his lips twitched. Pringle hastily bound his handkerchief to the gash the stone had made; he sprinkled the blood-streaked face with water; he spilled drops of water between the parted lips. Foy did not revive.

Pringle stuck his hat on the rifle muzzle and waved it over the parapet of rock.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Bring on your reward! I've got Foy! It's me—Pringle! Come get him; and be quick—he's bleeding mighty bad."

"Come out, you! Hands up and no monkey business!" answered a startled voice not fifty yards away.

"Who's that? That you, Nueces? Give me your word and I'll lug him out. No time to lose—he's hurt, and hurt bad."

"You play fair and we will. I give my word!" shouted Nueces.

"Here goes!" Pringle pitched the rifle over. A moment later he staggered out between the rocks, bearing Foy's heavy weight in his arms. The head hung helpless, blood-spattered; the body was limp and slack; the legs dragged sprawling; the dreaded hands were bound.

Pringle laid his burden on the grass.

"Here he is, you hyenas! His hands are tied—are you still afraid of him? Damn you! The man's bleeding to death!"

Chapter VI

"YOU treacherous, dirty hound!" said Breslin.

"Of all the low-down skunks I ever seen, you sure are the skunkiest!" said Nueces. "The sheriff was right after all. Cur-dog fits you to a T." He finished washing out the cut on Foy's head as he spoke. "Now the bandages, Anastacio. We'll have the blood stopped in a jiffy. Funny he hasn't come to. It's been a long while. It ain't the head ails him. This isn't such a deep cut; it oughtn't to put him out. Just happened to strike a vein." He bound up the cut with the deftness of experience.

"I hit him under the jaw," observed Pringle. "That's what did the business for him. He'll be around directly."

Anastacio looked up at Pringle; measureless contempt was in his eyes.

"Judas Iscariot could have sublet his job to you at half price if you'd been in the neighborhood. You are the limit, plus! I hope to see you fry in a New English hell!"

"Oh, that's all right, too," said Pringle unabashed. "I might just as well have that forty-five hundred as anyone. It wouldn't amount to much split amongst all you fellows, but it's quite a bundle for one man. That'll keep the wolf from the well-known door for quite a while."

"You won't touch a cent of it!" declared the sheriff.

"Won't I though? We'll see about that. I captured him alone, didn't I? Oh, I reckon I'll finger the money, alrighty!"

"Here, fellows; give him a bait of whisky," said Creagan.

Breslin, kneeling at Foy's side, took the

extended flask. They administered the stimulant cautiously, a sip at a time. Foy's eyes flickered; his breath came freer.

"He's coming!" said Breslin. "Give him a sip of water now."

"He'll be O. K. in five minutes, far as settin' up goes," said old Nueces, well pleased; "but he ain't goin' to be any too peart for quite some time—not for gettin' down off o' this hill. See—he's battin' his eyes and working his hands around. He sure heard the birdies sing!"

"The rest of you boys had just as well go on down to the shack," directed the sheriff. "Creagan and Joe and me will take care of Foy till he's able to move or be moved, and bring him into camp. You just lead up our three horses and an extra one for Foy—up as far as you can fetch 'em. One of you can ride home behind someone. Call down to the bunch under the cliff that we've got 'em,

and for them to hike out to the ranch and take a nap. You'd better turn old Vorhis loose—and that girl. They can't do any harm now."

"Bring my horse, too," said Anastacio. "I'm staying. I want to be sure the invalid gets . . . proper care."

"Me too," said Breslin.

"And I'm staying to kinder superintend," said Nueces dryly. "Sheriff," he added, as the main body of the posse fell off down the hill —"and you, too, Barela—I don't just know what's going on here, but I'm stayin' with you to a fare-you-well. You two seem to be bucking each other."

No one answered.

"Sulky, hey? Well, anyhow, call it off long enough to drive this Pringle thing away from here. He ain't fittin' for no man to herd with."

"I'm staying right with this man Foy till

I get that reward," announced Pringle. "Those are my superintentions. Much I care what you think about me! There's other places besides this."

Breslin raised his eye from Foy's face and regarded Pringle without heat—a steady, contemplative look, as of one who studies some strange and interesting animal. Then he waved his hand down the pass, where certain of the departing posse, were bringing the saddle horses in obedience to the sheriff's instructions.

"They'll carry a nice report of you," observed Breslin quietly. "What do you suppose that little girl will think?"

A flicker of red came to Pringle's hard brown face. Even the scorn of Espalin and Creagan had left him unabashed, but now he winced visibly; and, for once, he had no reply to make.

Foy gasped, struggled to a sitting position,

aided by his oddly assorted ministrants, gazed round in a dazed condition and lapsed back into unconsciousness.

"I'll take my dyin' oath it ain't the cut that ails him," said the ranger, tucking a coat under Foy's blood-stained head. "That must have been a horrible jolt on his jaw, Pringle. You're no kind of a man at all—no part of a man. You're a shameless, black-hearted traitor; but I got to hand it to you as a slugger. Two knock-outs in one day—and such men as them! I don't understand it."

"He 'most keel Applegate," said the Mexican.

"Aw, it's easy!" said Pringle eagerly. "There ain't one man in a thousand knows how to fight. It ain't cussin' and gritting your teeth, and swellin' up your biceps and clenching your fists up tight that does the trick. You want to hit like there wasn't anybody there. I'll show you sometime."

He paused inquiringly, as if to book any acceptance of this kindly offer. No such engagements being made, Pringle continued:

"Supposin' you was throwin' a baseball and your hand struck a man accidentally; you'd hurt him every time—only you'd break your arm that way. That ain't the way to strike. I'll show you."

"That wasn't no olive branch I was holdin' out," stated Nueces River. "You'll show me nothin'—turncoat!"

"It helps a lot, too, when the man you hit is not expecting it," suggested Anastacio smoothly. "You might show me sometime—when I'm looking for it."

"Now what's biting you?" demanded Pringle testily. "What did you expect me to do—send 'em a note by registered mail?"

"I'm not speaking about Applegate. That was all right. I am speaking about your friend."

"Here; Kit's coming to life again," said Lisner.

Kitty Foy rolled over; they propped him up; he looked round rather wildly from one to the other. His face cleared. His eye fell upon Pringle, where it rested with a steady intentness. When he spoke, at last, he ignored the others entirely.

"And I thought you were my friend, Pringle. I trusted you!" he said with ominous quietness. "I'll make a note of it. I have a good memory, Pringle—and good friends. Give me some water, someone. I feel sick."

Espalin brought a canteen.

"Take your time, Chris," said Lisner. "Tell us when you feel able to go."

"I'll be all right after a little. Say, boys, it was the queerest feeling—coming to, I mean. I could almost hear your voices, first. Then I heard them a long ways off but I

couldn't make any sense to the words. Here; let me lean my back up against this rock and sit quiet for a while. Then we'll go. I'm giddy yet."

"I've got it!" announced Nueces a moment later. "Barela, he's hankering to be sheriff—that's the trouble. He wanted to take Chris himself, to help things along. That would be quite a feather in any man's hat—done fair. And the sheriff, natural enough, he don't want nothing of the kind."

"That's it," said Anastacio, amusement in his eyes. "I knew you were a good gunman, Nueces, but I never suspected you of brains before."

"What's the matter with that guess?" said Nueces sulkily. "Kid, you're always ridin' me. Don't you try to use any spurs!"

"I'm in on that," said Pringle, rising brightly. "That's my happy chance to join in this lovin' conversation. Speaking about

gunmen, I'm a beaut! See that hawk screechin' around up there? Well, watch!"

The hawk soared high above. Pringle barely raised Foy's rifle to his shoulder as he fired; the hawk tumbled headlong. Pringle jerked the lever, throwing another cartridge into the barrel, as if to fire again at the falling bird. Inconceivably swift, the cocked rifle whirled to cover the seated posse.

"Steady!" said Pringle. "I'm watchin' you, Nueces! Chris, when you're able to walk, go on down and pick you a horse from that bunch. Unsaddle the others and drive 'em along a ways as you go." Still speaking, he edged behind the cover of a high rock. "I'll address the meetin' till you get a good head start. . . . Steady in the boat!"

"Well, by Heck!" said Nueces.

"And I thought you had betrayed me!" cried Foy.

"Well, I hadn't. This was the only show

to get off. . . . I hate to kill you, Nueces; but I will if you make a move."

"Hell! I ain't makin' no move! What do you think I am—a damn fool?" said Neuces. "If I moved any it was because I am about to crack under the justly celebrated strain. Say, young fellow, it strikes me that you change sides pretty often."

"Yes; I am the Acrobat of the Breakfast Table," said Pringle modestly. "Thanks for the young fellow. That listens good."

"Look out I don't have you performing on a tight rope yet!" growled the sheriff hoarsely. "There'll be more to this. You haven't got out of the country yet."

"That will be all from you, Sheriff. You, too, Creagan—and Espalin. Not a word or I'll shoot. And I don't care how soon you begin to talk. That goes!"

Espalin shriveled up; the sheriff and Creagan sat sullen and silent.

Foy got to his feet rather unsteadily.

"Chris, you might slip around and gather up their guns," said Pringle. "Pick out one for yourself. I left yours where I threw it when I picked it out of your belt. I meant to knock you out, Chris—there wasn't any other way; but I didn't mean to plumb kill you. You hit your head on a rock when you fell. It wouldn't have done any good to have got the drop on you. You had made up your mind not to surrender. You would have shot anyhow; and, of course, I couldn't shoot. I'd just have got myself killed for nothing. No good to play I'd taken you prisoner. This crowd knew you wouldn't be taken—except by treachery. So I played traitor. As it was, when I knocked you out you didn't look much like no put-up job. You was bleeding like a stuck pig."

"Hold on, there, before you try to take my gun!" warned old Nueces River as Foy

came to him for his gun, collecting. "You got the big drop on me, Pringle, and I wouldn't raise a hand to keep Chris from getting off anyhow—not now. But I used to be a ranger—and the rangers were sworn never to give up their guns."

"How about it, Pringle?" asked Foy, who had already relieved the sheriff and his satellites of their guns. "He'll do exactly as he says—both ways."

"I wasn't done talking yet," said Nueces irritably. "But I'll let Chris take my gun, on one condition."

"What's that?" inquired Pringle.

"Why, if you ain't busy next Saturday I'd like to have you call around—about one o'clock, say—and kick me good and hard."

"Let him keep his gun. He called me a young fellow. And I don't want Breslin's, anyway. He's all right. Not to play any favorites, let Anastacio keep his. There are

times," said Pringle, "when I have great hopes of Anastacio. I'm thinking some of taking him in hand to see if I can't make a man of him."

"Ananias the Amateur," said Anastacio, "I thank you for those kind words. And I'd like to see you Saturday about two—when you get through with Nueces. I'm next on the waiting list. This will be a lesson to me never to let my opinion of a man be changed by anything he may do."

"If you fellows feel that way," said Foy, "how about me? How do you suppose I feel? This man has risked his life fifty times for me—and what did I think of him?"

"If you ask me, Christopher," said Anastacio, "I think you were quite excusable. It was all very well to dissemble his love—but I should feel doubtful of any man that handed me such a wallop as that until the matter had been fully explained."

"What I want to know, Pringle, is, how the deuce you got up here so slick?" said Nueces.

"Oh, that's easy! I can run a mile in nothing flat."

"Oh—that's it? You hid in the water pen?"

"Under the troughs. Bright idea of yours, them fires! I knew just where not to go. After you left I hooked a horse. If you'd had sense enough to go with the sheriff and eat your supper like a human being I'd 'a' hooked two horses, and Chris and me would now be getting farther and farther. I don't want you ever to do that again. Suppose Chris had killed me when I tried to knock him out? Fine large name I would 'a' left for myself, wouldn't I?"

"If you had fought it out with us," said Breslin musingly, "you would have been killed—both of you; and you would have

killed others. Mr. Pringle, you have done a fine thing. I apologize to you."

"Why, that all goes without saying, my boy. As for my part—why, I don't bother much about a blue tin heaven or a comic supplement hell, but I'm right smart interested in right here and now. It's a right nice little old world, take it by and large, and I like to help out at whatever comes my way, if it takes fourteen innings. But, so long as you feel that way about it, maybe you'll believe me now, when I say that Christopher Foy was with me all last night and he didn't shoot Dick Marr."

"That's right," said Foy. "I don't know who killed Dick Marr; but I do know that Creagan, Joe Espalin, and Applegate intended to kill me last night. They gave me back my sixshooter, that Ben Creagan had borrowed—and it was loaded with blanks. Then they pitched onto me, and if it hadn't

been for Pringle they'd have got me sure! We left town at eleven o'clock and rode straight to the Vorhis Ranch."

"I believe you," said Anastacio. "You skip along now, Chris. You're fit to ride."

"Why shouldn't I stay and see it out?"

"It won't do. For one thing, your thinker isn't working as per invoice," said Nueces River. "You're in no fix to do yourself justice. We'll look after your interests. You know some of the posse might be coming back, askin' fool questions. Pull your freight up to the Bar Cross till we send for you."

"Well—if you think Pringle isn't running any risks I'll go."

"We'll take care of Pringle. Guess we'll make him sheriff next fall, maybe—just to keep Anastacio in his place. Drift!"

"No sheriffin' for mine, thanks. Contracting is my line. Subcontracting!"

"So long, boys! You know what I'd like

to say. You gave me a square deal, you three chaps," said Foy. "Get word to Stella as soon as ever you can. She thinks I'm a prisoner, you know. You know what I want to say there, Pringle—tell her for me. . . . Say! Why don't you all go in now? You boys all know that Stella's engaged to me, don't you? What's the good of keeping her in suspense? Go on to the ranch, right away."

"I told you your head wasn't working just right," jeered Nueces. "We want to give you a good start. They'll be after you again, and you're in no fix to do any hard riding. But one of us will go. Breslin, you go."

"Too late," observed Anastacio quietly. There is Miss Vorhis now, with her father. They're climbing to the Gap. Go on, Foy."

"They've got a led horse," said Nueces as Stella and the Major came to the highest

point of the Gap. "Who's that for? Chris? But they couldn't know about Chris. And how did they get here so quick? Don't seem like they've had hardly time."

Stella dismounted; she pressed on up the hill to meet her lover. The first sunshafts struck into the Gap, lit up the narrow walls with red glory.

"*Magic Casements!*" thought Pringle.

"Watch Foy get over the ground!" said Anastacio. "He'll break his neck before he gets down. I don't blame him. He's nearly down. Look the other way, boys!"

They looked the other way, and there were none to see that meeting. Unless, perhaps, the gods looked down from high Olympus—the poor immortals—and turned away, disconsolate, to the cheerless fields of asphodel.

"But they're not going away," said Breslin after a suitable interval. "They're waiting; and the Major's waving his hat at us."

"I'll go see what they want," said Anastacio.

In a few minutes he was back, rather breathless and extremely agitated in appearance.

"Well? Spill it!" said Nueces. "Get your breath first. What's the trouble?"

"Applegate's dead. Joe Espalin, I arrest you for the murder of Richard Marr! Applegate confessed!"

"He lied! He lied!" screamed Espalin. "I was with Ben till daylight, at the monte game; they all tell you. The sheriff he try to make me keel heem—he try to buy me to do eet—he keel Dick Marr heemself!"

"That's right!" spoke Creagan, suddenly white and haggard. His voice was a cringing whine; his eyes groveled. "Marr was at Lisner's house. We all went over there after the fight. Lisner waked Marr up—he'd been tryin' to egg Marr on to kill

Foy all day, but Marr was too drunk. He was sobering up when we waked him. Lisner tried to rib him up to go after Foy and waylay him—told him he had been threatening Foy's life while he was drunk, and that Foy'd kill him if he didn't get Foy first. Dick said he wouldn't do it—he'd go along to help arrest Foy, but that's all he'd do. The sheriff and Joe went out together for a powwow. The sheriff came back alone, black as thunder—him and Dick rode off together——"

The sheriff sprang to his feet, his heavy face bloated and blotched with terror.

"He cursed me; he tried to pull his gun!" he wailed. His eyes protruded, glaring; one hand clutched at his throat, the other spread out before him as he tottered, stumbling. "Oh, my God!" he sobbed.

"That will do nicely," said Anastacio. "You're guilty as hell! I'll put your own handcuffs on you. Oddly enough, the law

provides that when it is necessary to arrest the sheriff the duty falls to the coroner. It is very appropriate. You must pardon me, Mr. Lisner, if I seem unsympathetic. Dick Marr was your friend! And you have not been entirely fair with Foy, I fear. . . . Creagan, we'll hold you and Joe for complicity and for conspiracy in Foy's case. We'll arrest Applegate, too, when we get to camp. He'll be awfully vexed."

"What!" shrieked the sheriff, raising his manacled hands. "Liar! Murderer!"

"So Applegate's not dead? Well, I'm just as well pleased," said Pringle.

"Not even hurt badly. I was after the Man Lower Down. What the Major told me was that the Barelas were at the ranch—more than enough to hold Lisner's crowd down. They come at daylight. I was expecting that, and waiting. As I told you, that's the best thing I do—waiting."

"But how did you know?" demanded Breslin, puzzled.

"I didn't know, for sure. I had a hunch and I played it. So I killed poor Applegate—temporarily. It worked out just right and nothing to carry."

"One of the mainest matters with the widely-known world," said Pringle wearily, "is that people won't play their hunches. They haven't spunk enough to believe what they know. Let me spell it out for you in words of two cylinders, Breslin: You saw that I knew Creagan and Applegate, while they positively refused to know me at any price; you heard the sheriff deny that I was at the Gadsden House before I'd claimed anything of the sort. Of course you didn't know anything about the fight at the Gadsden House, but that was enough to show you something wasn't right, just the same. You had all the material to build a nice plump

hunch. It all went over your head. You put me in mind of the lightning bug:

"The lightning bug is brilliant,
But it hasn't any mind;
It wanders through creation
With its headlight on behind.

"Come on—let's move. I'm fair dead for sleep."

"Just a minute!" said Anastacio. "I want to call your attention to the big dust off in the north. I've been watching it half an hour. That dust, if I'm not mistaken, is the Bar Cross coming; they've heard the news!"

"So, Mr. Lisner, you hadn't a chance to get by with it," said Pringle slowly and thoughtfully. "If I hadn't balked you, the Barelas stood ready; if the Barelas failed, yonder big dust was on the way; half your own posse would have turned on you for half a guess at the truth. It's a real nice little world—and it hates a lie. A good

many people lay their fine-drawn plans, but they mostly don't come off! Men are but dust, they tell us. Magnificent dust! This nice little old world of ours, in the long run, is going right. You can't beat the Game! Once, yes—or twice—not in the long run. The Percentage is all against you. You can't beat the Game!"

"It's up to you, Sheriff," said Anastacio briskly. "I can turn you over to the Bar Cross outfit and they'll hang you now; or I can turn you over to the Barelas and you will be hung later. Dick Marr was your friend! Take your choice. You go on down, Pringle, while the sheriff is looking over the relative advantages of the two propositions. I think Miss Vorhis may have something to say to you."

She came to meet him; Foy and the Major waited by the horses.

"John!" she said. "Faithful John!" She sought his hands.

"There now, honey—don't take on so! Don't! It's all right! You know what the poet says:

"Cast your bread upon the waters
And you may live to say:
'Oh, how I wish I had the crust
That once I threw away!'"

Her throat was pulsing swiftly; her eyes were brimming with tears, bruised for lost sleep.

"Dearest and kindest friend! When I think what you have done for me—that you faced shame worse than death—guarded by unprovable honor—John! John!"

"Why, you mustn't, honey—you mustn't do that! Why, Stella, you're crying—for me! You mustn't do that, Little Next Door!"

"If you had been killed, taking Chris—or

after you gave him up—no one but me would have ever believed but that you meant it."

"But you believed, Stella?"

"Oh, I knew! I knew!"

"Even when you first heard of it?"

"I never doubted you—not one instant! I knew what you meant to do. You knew I loved him. The led horse was for you. I thought Chris would be gone. Why, John Wesley, I have known you all my life! You couldn't do that! You couldn't! Oh, kiss me, kiss me—faithful John!"

But he bent and kissed her hands—lest, looking into his eyes, she should read in the book of his life one long, long chapter—that bore her name.

THE END

THE COME ON

THE COME ON

"Fair fellow, said Sir Ector, knowest thou not in this country any adventures that be here nigh hand? Sir, said the forester, . . . strike upon that basin with the butt of thy spear thrice, and soon after thou shalt hear new tidings, and else hast thou the fairest grace that many a year had ever knight that passed through this forest. . . . Then anon Sir Ector beat on the basin as he were wood."

Chapter I

"Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go!"

STEVE THOMPSON had sold his cattle. El Paso is (was) the Monte Carlo of America. Therefore—The syllogism may be imperfectly stated, but the conclusion is sound. Perhaps there is a premise suppressed or overlooked somewhere.

Cash in hand, well fortified with paving material, Thompson descended on the Gate

City. At the expiration of thirty-six blameless hours he perceived that he was looking through a glass darkly, in the Business Man's Club, intently regarding a neatly-lettered placard which ambiguously advised all concerned in this wise:

IF DRINKING INTERFERES
WITH YOUR BUSINESS,
STOP IT.

A back-room door was opened. A burst of merriment smote across the loneliness. A head appeared. The tip of its nose quivered.

"Hey, old-timer! Will you walk into my parlor?" it jeered.

Steve walked over with dignity and firmly closed the door, closing it, through sheer inadvertence, from the inside. A shout of welcome greeted him.

With one exception—the Transient—they

were all old friends; the Stockman, the Judge, alike darkly attractive; the supple-handed Merchant, with curly hair and nose; and the strong quiet figure of the Eminent Person. A wight of high renown and national, this last, who had attained to his present bad Eminence through superior longevity. As he was still in the prime of life, it should perhaps be explained that his longevity was purely comparative, as contrasted with that of a number of gentlemen, eminent in the same line, who had been a trifle dilatory at critical moments, to them final.

The Merchant, sometime Banker-by-night, as now, began evening up chip-stacks. "How much?" he queried. The Judge and the Eminent Person hitched along to make room between them.

"I'm not playing to-night," Steve began.

He was cut short by a torrent of scoffing advice and information.

"Only one hundred to come in—all you got to get out."

"Another victim!"

"Bet 'em high and sleep in the streets!"

"Table stakes. Cuter goes for aces and flushes."

"Just give us what you can spare handy and go to bed. You'll save money and sleep."

"Straight flush the best hand."

"All ties go to the sweaters."

"A man and his money are soon parted!"

"You play the first hand for fun, and all the rest of the night to get even!" Thus, and more also, the Five in hilarious chorus.

"Any man caught bluffing loses the pot," added the Eminent Person, gravely admonitory. "And a Lalla-Cooler can only be played once a night."

"Nary a play play I," said Steve aggrievedly. "I stole just one measly horse and every one's called me a horse-thief ever since. But I've played poker, lo! these many years, and no one ever called me a gambler once. The best I get is, 'Clear out, you blamed sucker. Come back when you grow a new fleece!' and when I get home the wind moans down the chimney, 'O-o-o-gh-h! wha-a-t have you do-o-one with your summer's w-a-A-a-ges!"

"Aw, sit down—you're delayin' the game," said the Stockman. The Banker shoved over three stacks of patriotically assorted colors and made a memorandum. The Five howled mockery and derision, the cards danced and beckoned luringly in the mellow lamplight, the Judge pulled his coat-tail, the Major Premise tugged. Steve sat down, pulling his sombrero over his eyes.

"He that runneth after fools shall have

property enough," he quoted inaccurately. "I'll have some of your black hides on the fence by morning."

The cards running to him, it was not long before Steve doubled his "come-in" several times on quite ordinary hands, largely because his capital was so small that he could not be bluffed out. The betting was fierce and furious. Steve, "on velvet," played brilliantly. But he was in fast company—too fast for his modest means. The Transient seemed to have a bottomless purse. The Stockman had cattle on a thousand hills, the Merchant habitually sold goods at cost.

As for the Judge—his fine Italian hand was distinctly traceable in the frenzied replies to frenzied attacks upon certain frenzied financial transactions of his chief, a frenzied but by no means verdant copper magnate, to whom he, the Judge, was Pro-

cureur-General, adviser legal and otherwise. The Judge took no thought for the morrow, unless his frequently expressed resolve not to go home till that date may be so regarded.

The Eminent Person, a Republican for Revenue Only, had been awarded a remunerative Federal position as a tribute to his ambidextrous versatility in the life strenuous, and his known prowess as a "Stand-Patter."

Upon all these things Steve reflected. With caution, some caution, and again caution, a goodly sum might well be abstracted from these reckless and capricious persons; provided always that he had money on the table to play a good hand for what it was worth.

For long his luck held good. Having increased his gains manyfold, he was (being quite a natural person) naturally incensed

that they were not more. Yielding to his half-formed resolve, he dug up his herd of cattle and put them on the table. "I am now prepared to grab old Opportunity by the scalp-lock," he announced.

He played on with varying success. Presently, holding aces up, and being persistently crosslifted by the Eminent One and the Judge, after a one-card draw all around, he became obsessed with the fixed idea that they were both bluffing and afraid to show down. When this delusion was dispelled, he noted with chagrin that the spoils of Egypt had departed, taking with them some plenty of real money.

That was the turning-point. By midnight he was hoarse with repeating, parrot-wise, "That's good—give me another stack." His persistent losses won him sympathy, even from these hardened plungers.

"Bad luck, old man—sure!" purred the

consolatory Stockman, raking the pot. "I drawed out on you. Sometimes the cards run against a fellow a long time, that way, and then turn right around and get worse."

"Don't you worry about me," retorted Steve. "You're liable to go home talking to yourself, yet, if the cards break even."

In the early stages of the game Steve had been nervous and restless from the fever in his blood. Now he was smiling, easy, serene, his mind working smoothly, like a well-oiled machine. Collecting all his forces, counting the chances coolly, he played a steady, consistent game.

The reckless plunging ceased so far as it was against him. The others, for most part, merely called his tentative bets with wary respect. Men of his type are never so formidable as in defeat. Things had come to such a pass that many good hands netted him little or nothing. Then came a rally;

his pile crept slowly up until he was nearly even.

With twenty dollars each in a jackpot, the Eminent Person dealing, the Stockman modestly opened for two hundred. The Transient stayed, as did the Merchant and the Judge, the latter mildly stating that he would lie low and let some one else play his hand. Steve stayed.

"Happy as the dealer in a big jackpot," warbled the Eminent Person. "And now we will take an observation." He scrutinized his cards, contributed his quota, and raised for double the amount. "I'll just play the Judge's hand for him," he remarked blandly. The Stockman cheerfully re-raised five hundred.

The Transient, momentarily low in funds, stayed for all he had before him. "I've got a show for this much," he said, pushing back the side money. "*And* a pretty good one.

Bet your fool heads off! You've got to beat a hectic flush to finger this pot!"

The Merchant laid down three sevens, of diamonds, spades and clubs. "Any one got the seven of hearts?" he wondered. The Judge called. Steve, squeezing his hand carefully, drew out the seven of hearts, flashed it at the Merchant, replaced it, and stayed.

The Eminent Person, after due consideration, saw the five hundred and raised it to a thousand. "To dissuade you all from drawing out on me," he explained, stroking his mustache with deliberate care.

The Stockman called without comment. The Judge hesitated, swore ferociously, and finally called.

Steve squeezed his cards with both hands for a final corroborative inspection, scratched his head and rolled his eye solemnly around the festal board.

"Eleven hundred dollars of my good coin in there now, and here I sit between the devil and the deep, blue sea. One thousand bucks. Much money. Ugh! One thousand days, each day of twenty-four golden hours set with twenty near-diamond minutes! Well! I sure hate to give you fellows this good gold."

"Steve's got one of them things!" surmised the Stockman.

"A fellow *does* hate to lay down a bob-tail straight flush when there's such a chance for action if he fills," chimed in the Eminent dealer.

"It's face up, Steve. You'd just as well show us. My boy, you ought to wear a mustache," said the Judge, critically. "Your lips get pale and give you away when you try to screw your courage up. Of course, you've got a sweet, little, rosebud mouth;

but you need a big, ox-horn mustache in this vocation."

"Don't show it, Steve," advised the Stockman. "I judge his Honor's got one of them same things his black self. You might both fill—and you don't want to let him see how high yours is."

"If I only don't fill the wrong way," said Steve. "Want to split the pot or save stakes with me, Judge?"

"That would be a foolish caper. If I fill —I mean," the Judge corrected himself hastily—"I mean, I've got the money won now, unless you draw out, and that's a 52 to 1 shot."

."Me, too," said the dealer. "We both got it won. But I'll save out a hundred with you, Steve. That'll pay your bills and take you home."

"That'll be nine hundred to draw cards for a chance at nine thousand and action on

what I got left. Faint heart never won a jackpot. Here goes nothin'!" said Steve, pushing the money in. "One from the top, when you get to me. If I bet after the draw, you all needn't call unless you're a mind to."

"Got that side money and pot straight?" queried the dealer lightly. "All right?" He stretched out a long left arm and flipped the cards from the pack with a jerk of the wrist. "Cards and spades? (I'm pat, myself, of course.) Cards to you? None? Certainly. None to you, and one to you, one to you, none——"

Steve's card, spinning round as it came, turned over and lay face up on the table—the three of hearts. (Laymen will please recall that, as already specified, a straight flush was, in this game, the Best.) As the dealer was sliding the next card off to re-

place it, Steve caught the thin glint of a red 8 on the corner.

With a motion inconceivably swift he was on his feet, his left hand over the pack. "Hold on!" he cried. "Look at this!" He made a motion as if to spread out the four cards he had retained, checked himself and glared, crouching.

"Sit down, Steve. Don't be a fool," said the Stockman. "You know you've no right to an exposed card, and you know he didn't go to do it."

Steve bunched his four cards carefully and laid them on the table, face down. "Certainly not. Oh, no! He didn't go to do it. But he did it, just the same," he said bitterly. "Now, look here! I don't think there's anything wrong—not for a minute. Nothing worse'n dumb, idiotic thumb-hand-sidedness. I specially don't want no one else to get mixed up in this," with a glance at the

Stockman. "So you and the Judge needn't feel called upon to act as seconds. But I'm vexed. I'm vexed just about nine thousand dollars' worth, likely much more, if my hand hadn't been tipped. *Mira!*" addressing the dealer, who sat quietly holding the pack in his left hand, his right resting on the table. "I've a right to *call* for my card turned up, haven't I?"

"Sure thing," said the dealer equably.

"All right, then. One bad turn deserves another. But—plenty *cuidado!* If any card but the eight of hearts turns up, protect yourself, or somebody's widow'll be in a position to collect life insurance, and I ain't married! Turn her over." He leaned lightly on the table with both hands. Their eyes met in a level gaze.

"Let her zip!" said the Eminent Person. Without hesitation he dropped the card over. No slightest motion from either man, no re-

laxing of those interlocked eyes. A catching of breaths——

"The eight of hearts!" This in concert by the quartette of undisinterested witnesses.

The two Principals looked down, then. That the Eminent Person's free hand had remained passive throughout bore eloquent testimony to nerve and integrity alike. Nevertheless, he now ran that hand slowly through his hair and wiped his forehead. "That was one long five seconds—most a week, I guess. Did you ever see such a plumb dam-fool break in your whole life?" he said, appealingly, to the crowd.

"I guess," said Steve sagely, pushing the eight-spot in with his other cards—"I guess if you'd separated from a thousand big round dollars to draw a card and then got it turned over, *you* wouldn't have cared a whoop if your left eye was out, either. It *is*

warm, ain't it?" He sat down with a sigh of relief.

The Stockman bunched his cards idly and tapped the table with them. The Judge was casually examining the chandelier with interest and approval. Presently, he looked down and around.

"Oh, thunder! What are you waiting for, Thompson? I pass, of course!" he said testily.

Steve shoved in his pile. "As I mentioned a while ago, you're not obliged to call this," he said demurely. "Just suit yourselves."

One card at a time, with thumb and forefinger, the Eminent Person turned over his hand with careful adjustment and alignment. After much delay, he symmetrically arranged an Ace-full, face up, and regarded it with profound attention.

"That was a right good-looking hand, too

—before the draw," he remarked at last, sweeping them into the discard.

"Ye-es," assented the Stockman, mildly dubious. "It might have taken second money—maybe." He tossed in four deuces.

The Transient spread out a club flush. "Do you know?" he said confidentially—"do you know, I was actually glad to see that hand when I first picked it up?"

"Won't you fellows *never* learn to play poker?" said the Judge severely. "Why don't you stay out till you get something?" He laid his hand down. "Four tens and most five! The Curse of Scotland and Forty Miles of Railroad! *For*-ty miles, before the draw—and gone into the hands of a deceiver!"

"Oh!" Leaning over, Steve touched the ten of spades lightly. "So *that's* why I couldn't fill my hand!" he remarked innocently.

"Get out!" snorted the Judge. "No use throwing good money after bad. I wouldn't call you, not if I had five tens!"

He slammed in his hand. The Eminent Person thoughtfully took out the hundred he had saved. "Some one press the button, and I'll do the rest," said Steve. He removed the side-money, placidly ignoring the "pot" of some fifteen hundred dollars, for which the Transient, having his money all in, was entitled to a showdown.

The Transient's jaw dropped in unaffected amazement. Dealer and Stockman drummed their fingers on the table unconcernedly. And the Judge saw a great light.

"You, *Thompson!*" he roared. "Turn over that hand! I feel that you have treated this Court with the greatest contemptibility!" He pawed the discard with frantic haste, producing the seven of hearts.

"Why, you pink-cheeked, dewy-eyed catamaran! What —— *have* you got, anyway?"

"Why, Judge," said Steve earnestly, "I've got a strong case of circumstantial evidence." He turned over the eight of hearts; then, after a pause, the ace, king, queen and jack of spades; and resumed the stacking of his chips. "I discarded that seven of hearts," he said, smiling at the Merchant.

A howl of joyous admiration went up; the Transient raked in the pot.

"The Crime of the Century!" bellowed the Judge. "I'm the victim of the Accomplished Fact! Cash my checks! I'm going to join the Ladies' Aid!"

"Aw, shut up," gasped the Transient. "No sleep till morn where youth and booty meetsh! Give ush 'nother deck!"

But Steve, having stacked his chips, folded the bills and put them in his pocket.

"What's the matter with you, you old

fool?" demanded the Eminent Person affectionately. "You can't quit now."

Steve rose, bowing to right and left, spreading his hand over his heart. "Deeply as I regret and, as I might say, deplore, to quit a good easy game," he declaimed, "I must now remove myself from your big midst. For a Lalla-Cooler can only be played once in one night. Besides, I've always heard that no man ever quit ahead of the game, and I'm going to prove the rule. I will never play another card, never no more!"

"What—not in your whole life?" said the Stockman, chin on hand, raising his eyebrows at the last word.

"Oh—in my whole *life!*" admitted Steve. He drew a dollar from his pocket, balanced it on his thumb, and continued: "We will now invoke the arbitrament of chance to decide the destinies of nations. Heads, I or-

der an assortment of vines and fig trees, go back to the Jornado and become a cattle-king. Tails, I proceed to New-York-on-the-Hudson, by the Ess-Pee at 3:15 this A. M. presently, and arouse that somnolent city from its Rip Van Winkle."

The coin went spinning to the ceiling. "Tails!" said the Merchant, picking it up. "I must warn my friends on Wall Street. Hello! this is a bad dollar!"

"I'll keep it for a souvenir of the joyful occasion," said Steve. "Just one more now, and we'll all go home!"

"Hold on, you abandoned profligate!" said the Judge. "You don't know any one in the Big Burgh, do you? Thought not. Without there! Ho, varlet!" He thumped on the table, demanding writing materials. "I'll fix you out. Give you a letter to a firm of mining experts I'm in touch with."

After an interval devoted to refreshments,

the Judge read with all the pride of authorship:

Messrs. Atwood, Strange & Atwood,
25 Broad Street, New York City.

Gentlemen:

This will introduce to you Mr. Stephen Thompson, of Dundee, New Mexico. You will kindly consider yourself *in loco parentis* to him, charging same to my account.

On presentation of this letter, please pay Mr. Thompson's fine or go his bail, as the case may be, furnish him with pocket-money and a ticket home, and see him safely on the right train.

Should the matter be more serious, wire me at once. Periodical insanity can be readily proved. He has just recovered from a paroxysm at this writing. He is subject to these attacks whenever his wishes are crossed, having been raised a pet. There-

fore, you will be doing yourself a great favor by acceding to any request he may make, however unreasonable it may seem. It is unlucky to oppose or thwart him; but he is amenable to kindness. Kindly apprize municipal and Federal authorities for the preservation of public safety. Your loss is our eternal gain.

During the ensuing applause he signed this production. Steve pocketed it gravely. "Thank you," he said. "When I get down to husks I'll look up my locoed parent."

"The Bird of Time," said the Transient vociferously, "hash but a little way to flutter. Cash in! The bird ish on the wing! Tomorro'sh tangle to the winds reshign. Come, all ye midnight roish-roishterers! A few more kindly cupsh for Auld Lang Shine. Then let ush eshcort thish highwayman to

the gatesh of the city and cash him forth to outer darknesh! Let ush shing!

I stood on a flush at midnight,
When my money was nearly gone,
And two moonsh rosh over the city
Where there shouldn't have been but one.

. . . . .

In Ohio, one of rough appearance, clad in a fire-new, ready-made suit, began to pervade Thompson's car; restlessly rushing from one side to the other in conscientious effort to see all there was to be seen; finally taking to the vestibule as affording better conveniences for observations. He was, however, not so absorbed in the scenery but that he took sharp note of the cowboy's unsophisticated garb and guileless mien. Later, when Steve went into the smoker, he struck up acquaintance with him; initiated by the mere demand for a light, continued through

community of interest, as both being evidently non-urban.

A voluble and open-hearted person, the stranger, displaying much specie during their not infrequent visits to the buffet for refreshment of the jocund grape, where they vied with each other in liberality, and one who naïvely imparted his private history without reticence. A lumberman, who had risen from the ranks; a Non-Com. of Industry, so to speak, who, having made his pile, was now, impelled by filial piety, revisiting his old New England Home.

This touching confidence so ingratiated the bluff and hearty son of toil to the unsuspicious cowboy, that he, in turn, began to ooze information at every pore. Steve Thompson was his name; miner of Butte, Montana. He had, after years of struggle and defeat, made a lucky strike. He had bonded his mine to New York parties—the

Copper-bottom, just to the left of the High Line Trail from Anaconda to Philipsburgh; receiving $10,000 down for a quarter interest, giving option on two-thirds remainder for $50,000, if, after six months' development work, the mine justified its promise. It had proved all his fancy painted it; he was on his way to the big town, to be paid the balance on the sixteenth, at the office of—where is that letter? Oh, yes, here it is—"Atwood, Strange & Atwood, 25 Broad St." —retaining a one-fourth interest. He was going to see the sights. Possibly he would take a trip round the world.

Incited by judicious interest of his auditor, he prattled on and on, till the lumberman—(Dick Barton, the name of him)—was possessed with the salient points of his past, present and future; embellished by a flood of detail and personal reminiscence. It is to be regretted that the main points were inac-

curate and apocryphal, the collateral details gratuitous improvisations, introduced for the sake of local color.

"For," Steve reasoned, "evidently this party is a seeker after knowledge; it is better to siphon than to be pumped. Doubtless it will be as bread upon the waters."

Freely did he gush and freely buy—(the bulk of his money, in large bills, was safely wadded at the bottom of the six-shooter scabbard under his arm, his .45 on guard—but his well-filled billbook was much in evidence). So thoroughly charmed was Barton that he lamented loud and long that he and his new acquaintance might not have their first view of the metropolis in company. But he had promised his aged parents to come to them directly, by way of Albany. However, he was a day ahead of his schedule; neither of them had seen Niagara; if Thompson would excuse him, he would write

his father, that the letter would go on to herald the hour of his coming. Then they both would take one day's lay-over at Buffalo, visiting the famous cataract entirely at his, Barton's, expense. Thence, exchanging addresses, on their respective ways, to meet in Manhattan later. To which Thompson agreed with cordiality.

The letter Barton mailed at Buffalo was addressed:

J. F. MITCHELL
Binghamton
The Arlington N. Y.

Chapter II

"A goodly, portly man, i' faith, and a corpulent: of a cheerful look, a pleasing eye, and a most noble carriage; and, as I think, his age some fifty, or by'r lady, inclining to three score."

IT had been a good morning, thought Mendenhall. If only more citizens like this big, talkative, prosperous looking stranger would settle in Elmsdale! Over a thousand dollars' worth in one bill—not bad, that, for a little rural New York town. Moreover, the stranger had evinced a taste in his selection of furniture and carpets scarcely to be expected from his slightly overdressed appearance and his loud, dominating talk. His choice had been always swift and certain, wholly unaffected by prices. Obviously, a self-made man, with a long purse, this.

The big man threw up his hands in mock surrender. "Time—King's X—'nuff!" he bellowed, a pervading and infectious smile spreading over his broad, jovial, smooth-shaven face. "Police! Nine—eleven—twelve hundred, sixty-eight. I'll pay you a hundred to bind the—No, I'll just pay you now and have done with it. Don't want the stuff delivered till some time next week, though. Wife'll run up to-morrow or next day to take her choice of the two houses I've been looking at. Then, paper-hanging, mantels, plumbing and all that—Make it even twelve-fifty?" he demanded, pen poised in a plump, white hand, eying the dealer with shrewd expectancy.

"Certainly, certainly," Mendenhall murmured, rubbing his hands with a thought of future custom.

Scratch-tch-ch! The check was made out with a flourish. "Here you are. I'll come

round when I'm ready and tell you where to send the stuff. By the way, where do you bank? Want to send in checks for collection."

"At the Farmers' and Citizens', mostly. The First National is right around the corner, first turn to your left. Thank you very much, Mr."—he glanced at the check—"Mr. Britt—Mr. N. C. Britt. I hope for the pleasure of your better acquaintance, Mr. Britt."

"Oh, you will!" laughed Britt. "Nice little town, here. If I like it as well a year from now as I do to-day I'll stick. Time for an old fellow like me to settle down. I've worked hard all my life. But I've got enough. What's the good of more? No dying in the harness for mine. I want to retire, as they call it, and let the young bucks do the work."

"Oh, you're not an old man," protested

Mendenhall with reason. "Your amazing vitality—your energetic——" Britt pulled at his luxuriant white hair.

"Oh, good enough for an old has-been!" He laughed with pardonable vanity. "Pretty hearty yet, owing to having lived a clean and wholesome life, thank God; but aging, sir—aging. 'The evil days draw nigh!'" He shook his head with a sober air, which at once gave way to the satisfied smile habitual on his round, contented face. Briskly, he consulted a heavy gold repeater, replacing it with the quick movement of one to whom seconds are valuable. "Well, well! Twelve-thirty! Been here all morning, picking and choosing! Take luncheon with me? No? All right—see you later!" He swung out through the door.

Turning the corner, he crossed the street to the First National, bounced in and pre-

sented himself at the teller's window, lighting a cigar, puffing like a tugboat. "To open a small account—two of 'em. Checks for collection," he announced. Tone and manner were breezily self-assertive; the president, from his desk, turned and looked. He indorsed, blotting with a swift dab, and a final fillip through the window. "Chicago, thirty-three hundred—credit to Britt & Stratton. Here's our signature. Denver, eight hundred, to private account H. E. Stratton. He'll be here next week. I'll bring him around and identify. Draw on this by Wednesday? Good! Gimme checkbook. Excuse haste; yours truly!" He popped out.

The president smiled. "An original character, apparently," he said. "He doesn't aim to let grass grow under *his* feet."

Between two and three Britt bustled into Mendenhall's, making for the office.

"Oh, I say!" he puffed, as Mendenhall rose. "Banked that check yet?"

"Not yet," replied the other sedately. "It is our custom to send the day's checks for deposit just before three. Nothing wrong, I trust?"

Britt dropped into a chair, mopping his face. "Oh, no, nothing *wrong;* but I'm afraid I've made a little mistake. I'm not a good business man—not systematic—though I worry along. Like the young wife's bookkeeping—'Received fifty dollars from John—spent it all.' Fact is, I never entirely got over the days when a very short memory was enough to keep track of all my transactions. Always forgetting to fill out my stubs," he explained. "So I don't remember what bank I checked on. But I'm pretty sure 'twas the Com-

mercial, and my balance there is low—not enough to cover your bill, I'm thinking." He leaned back, his portly sides shaking with merriment. "By Jove!" he roared. "It would have been a good joke on me if I hadn't remembered. Nice introduction to a town where I expect to make my home. Oh, well, even so, you had the furniture safe in your warehouse. Guess you wouldn't have been much scared, eh?" He poked Mendenhall playfully with a stubby finger. "Well, let's see about it."

Secretly, the other resented the familiarity, deprecated the boisterous publicity with which the stranger saw fit to do business. Business, with Mendenhall, was a matter for dignified and strictly private conference. With stately precision he took up the neat bundle of checks which he had just indorsed, ran them over, slipped one from under the rubber band, and scanned it with great de-

liberation. He could not afford to offend a good customer, but he could thus subtly rebuke such hasty and slipshod methods.

"Yes, it is on the Commercial." He held it out inquiringly.

"Thought so!" snorted the other. "Dolt! Imbecile! Ass! I'll apply for a guardian. Fix you out this time!" He whipped out fountain pen and checkbook. "National Trust Company (guess I've got enough *there*). Pay to J. C. Mendenhall & Co.—how much was that?"

He took the check from the unresisting Mendenhall, spread it out on the desk with a sprawling gesture, tore it to strips with the same impetuous vehemence, and threw it in the waste-basket. After this brief outburst of anger his good humor returned. "Twelve-fifty. Here you are. No mistake this time. Say, old man, that's the drinks on me—come along!"

"Thank you, I never drink," returned Mendenhall primly. He had not relished the roughness with which the other had snatched the check from him, though making allowance for the natural annoyance of one who had been betrayed into a mortifying mistake.

"All the better, all the better. Seldom do myself, but sometimes—— Have a cigar? No? Well, I must toddle along!"

It may here be mentioned that during his moment of impulsive vexation Mr. Britt had inconsiderately substituted for the "Commercial" check another, precisely similar save for the important particular that it lacked the Mendenhall indorsement. The original had slipped between the leaves of Britt's check book, under cover of his large hands. Those hands were most expert in various amusing and adroit feats of legerdemain, though Mr. Britt's modesty led

him to a becoming, if unusual, reticence in this regard. The substitute, as we have seen, was in the waste-basket.

Just before three Britt ran heavily up the steps of the First National, puffing down the corridor, cocking a hasty eye at the clock as he came.

"Hey, there, sonny! I was almost too late, wasn't I?" was his irreverent greeting to the cashier. "Time to cash this before closing up?" he demanded breathlessly, but with unabated cheerfulness. He flopped the check over. "Mendenhall's indorsement. Hi! Mr. President! Just a minute! I'm a stranger here, but if you'll let us slip in at a side door I'll trot around and fetch Mendenhall. Need this money to-night."

The president took the check from the indignant young cashier, nodded at the familiar signature with the cabalistic peculiari-

ties which attested its authenticity, glanced indulgently at the bobbing white head in window, with difficulty suppressing a smile.

"It will not be necessary, Mr.—Mr. Britt," he said courteously. "Not necessary at all. You have an account here, I believe?"

"It won't be here long," retorted Britt, with garrulous good nature. "Draw it all out next week. Eleven, twelve—*and* fifty. Thanks to *you*. There goes the clock. Good day!"

"Quite an odd character, that Mr. Britt?" said the president casually at the club that night. "Boyish old chap."

"Yes, isn't he?" said Mendenhall, folding his paper. "I sold him a pretty stiff bill of goods this morning. Warmish, I take it. He's going to settle here."

"Friend of yours?"

"Oh, no, I never saw him before."

"Why, you indorsed his check for twelve hundred and fifty," said the president, interested, but not alarmed. Doubtless the man had references. Besides, his face was a letter of credit in itself.

"Oh, yes," said Mendenhall unsuspiciously, thinking of the check sent to the Farmers' and Citizens' Bank. The president, thinking of the other, was fully reassured, and was about to pass on. Here the matter might have dropped, and would in most cases. But Mendenhall, a methodical and careful man, wished to vindicate his business prudence by explaining that he had taken no risk in indorsing for a stranger, since he retained possession of the goods.

The rest is too painful.

"I do not rhyme for that dull wight" who does not foresee that New York, Chicago and Denver checks were returned in due course, legibly inscribed with the sad-

dest words of tongue or pen, "No funds." Or that Mr. Britt fully justified his self-given reputation for absence of mind by neglecting to call for his furniture.

Meanwhile, Mr. Britt unostentatiously absented his body as well, taking the trolley for an inland village. At the time of Mendenhall's interview with the president he was speeding southward across country in a livery rig, catching the Lackawanna local for Binghamton about the time the wires were working and he was being searched for on all Lehigh Valley trains.

"Hello, Kirkland!" he said to the night clerk at the Arlington. "Back again, like a bad sixpence! Have my trunk sent up, will you? No—no supper!"

"Letter for you, Mr. Mitchell. Just came," said the clerk respectfully. "So we were expecting you. Haven't seen you for a long time."

Britt-Mitchell thrust the letter in his pocket unopened. "It'll keep till morning. I'm for bed. Good-night, Frank."

He turned in, weary with his exertions to be sure, but with the pleasing consciousness that

. . . some one done
Has earned a night's repose.

Elmsdale never learned these particulars, however. His genial and expansive smile and the unobtrusive manner of his fading away are there vaguely associated with Cheshire Puss, of joyful memory, whose disappearance, like his, began with the end of the tale.

Chapter III

"There's a franklin in the wilds of Kent, hath brought three hundred marks with him in gold . . . a kind of auditor."

IT was quite late when Britt-Mitchell arose like a giant refreshed. First ringing for breakfast, he bathed and shaved and arrayed himself carefully in glad habiliments of quiet taste and cut, in which he bore slight resemblance to the rough-and-ready Britt of Elmsdale.

Sitting indolently sideways to the table, his feet on a chair, he discussed an excellent breakfast leisurely, as one at peace with the world. His paper was propped before him; he chuckled as he read. Breakfast finished, he pulled his coffee over, lit a cigar and puffed luxuriously. Not till then

did he open the letter taken from the discarded coat of yesterday. It read:

Well, old man, I am sending you an easy one. Crack him hard for me. He's the rankest sucker yet. I was going to work the Scholar's Gambit on him, but he'll get his hooks on a whole bunch of money when he gets down town, so I turn him over to you. Fifty thou. to be paid him by Atwood, Strange & Atwood. You know of them—Mining Engineers and Experts, 25 Broad. Let him get the boodle and hand him a sour one.

Name, Steve Thompson, en route to New York. Section 5, Sleeper Tonawanda, Phoebe Snow. Brown, smooth-shaved, hand-me-down suit, cowboy hat. From Butte, Montana. Has sold his mine, the Copper-bottom (on right of trail northeast

of Anaconda). Former partner, Frank Short, killed by powder explosion at Bozeman, two years ago. Appendix subjoined with partial list of his friends, details about his mine, his ten years of unsuccessful prospecting, etc. Am not so explicit as usual, because he is such a big-mouthed damfool he'll tell you all he knows before you get to Hoboken. Also I am in some haste. I am to take him to Niagara with me to give you time to get this and join him at Binghamton, if you are there as planned. If not, I have wired Jim to meet train at Hoboken and keep in touch with him till you come, scraping acquaintance if necessary. Then he can disappear and leave you to put the kibosh on him. Jim is all right, but he lacks your magnetism, and your light, firm touch. You can beat us all putting up a blue front.

RUBE.

Mr. Mitchell rose to instant action. In a very few minutes his trunk was packed, his bill paid. He then hied him in haste to the Carnegie Library, where, till train time, he fairly saturated himself with information concerning Butte and vicinity.

When the train pulled out from Binghamton, Mitchell sat across the aisle from Thompson, deep in his paper. A visorless black cap adorned his head, beneath which flowed his reverend white hair; rimless eyeglasses imparted to his unimpeachable respectability an eminently aristocratic air. These glasses he wiped carefully from time to time with a white silk handkerchief, which he laid across his ample knees, resuming his reading, oblivious to all else.

The paper was laid aside and the big man became immersed in a magazine. The handkerchief slipped from his knees into the aisle. Thompson politely restored it.

"Thank you, young man, thank you," said Britt. Then a puzzled look came over his brow. Polishing the glasses he took another sharp look. He leaned across the aisle.

"I *beg* your pardon," he said, with stately courtesy. "But I am sure I have met you somewhere. No, don't tell me. Pardon an old man's harmless vanity, but it is my weakness to make my memory do its work unaided, when possible. I have a famous memory generally, and yours is not a face to be easily forgotten. Let me see—not in New York, I think—Philadelphia—Washington? No—you would be from the West, by your hat. Um-m-Omaha—Chicago, St. Louis?—*Butte!*" he said, with a resounding thwack on his knee. "Butte! 'Where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile'!"

"Right you are," said the Westerner, well

pleased. "I seem to remember you, too."

"I have it!" said Mitchell. "Don't remember your name—but you're the very man Judge Harney pointed out to me as the unluckiest prospector in Montana. Said you could locate a claim bounded on all sides by paying property and gopher through to China without ever striking ore."

"May I come over there and talk?" said Steve. "Mighty glad to see some one from my town. You didn't live there though, or I should have met you."

"Certainly," said Mitchell, making room. "Glad to have you. Live there? Oh, no, I only made a couple of trips. Some associates of mine were in with Miles Finlen —you know him, I reckon?—on the Bird's-eye proposition, and I took a flyer with them," he explained. "I lost out. Dropped several dollars." His face lit up with comfortable good-humor. "It was a good mine,

but it got tied up in the courts. Let me see —what did Harney call you—Townsend, Johnson?"

"Thompson," said Steve, smiling. "Steve Thompson."

"So it was—so it was. Well, I was getting close. Glad to meet you, Mr. Thompson. That is my name." He handed over a bit of pasteboard, inscribed:

MR. J. F. MITCHELL

"On Vesey Street now, just south of Barclay Street Ferry. I'll jot down the number—you want to come round and look me up. Sorry I can't ask you to use my house for headquarters. Wife's away to Bar Harbor for the summer, and I'm camping out in a hotel. Tell you what, though—you put up at my caravanserai—the Cornucopia—good house, treat you well. I'll

be busy a day or so catching up after my trip up-state, but after that I'll show you around. But perhaps you've been here before?"

"Not I," said Steve. "My first trip. Haven't been out of Montana since I was a kid. I'm sure glad to meet a friend so soon."

"Lots of Montana people here," said Mitchell cheerily. "We'll look 'em up. Probably find some of your old friends. People here from everywhere. Say—Judge Harney got into a bad mix-up, didn't he? That young Charley Clark is a devil. I've met him up here." With this he launched into a discussion of Butte, with inquiries as to various figures of local prominence, from which Steve was fain to escape by turning the talk on his final good luck, the sale of his mine and his rosy prospects. For Mitchell had "crammed up" on Butte indus-

triously. Steve lacked his facilities, his sole source of information being certain long-past campfire tales of Neighbor Jones.

"Made it at last, did you? Glad to hear it. Can't keep a good man down, as the whale said to Jonah," said Mitchell heartily. "'But with all thy getting, get understanding,'" he quoted with unctuous benevolence. "The city is full of traps for the unwary. You can't be too careful, young man. Don't be drawn into gambling, or drinking, or fast company, or you'll be robbed before you know it. Watch out for pickpockets, and, above all, be chary of making acquaintance with strangers. They're sly down here, my boy—devilish sly. Have you any friends in town? If you have, get them to go around with you till you learn the ropes."

"Don't know a soul but you," said Steve truthfully. "But I have a letter here to the

people who are putting the sale through. Do you know these people?"

"Atwood, Strange & Atwood," Mitchell read. "A good, reliable firm. I don't know them, but I know of 'em. They will advise you just as I do."

"But," objected Steve, "I want to see a good time. That's what I come for. For instance, I want to see the races. And naturally, I want to put up a few dollars to make it interesting."

"Bad business—bad business," admonished the elder man wisely. "I don't object to a quiet game of cards myself, among friends, and for modest stakes. But I can't afford to do anything to hurt my business reputation. Let a man of small means, like myself, play the ponies, or affect shady company, and what happens? All the banks know it at once, and shut down on loans in-

stanter. They keep tab on all business men religiously."

"What's your line?" said Steve, impressed.

"Mainly buying on commission for Mexican and South American trade—though I handle a good many orders for country dealers, too," replied Mitchell. "My specialty is agricultural implements, barbed wire, machinery and iron stuff generally, for the export trade. There's things about it would surprise you. Why, such things, farm machinery more especially, retail in Buenos Ayres at from 40 to 60 per cent. of what they do here, after paying freight charges and a snug commission to me."

"How can they do it?" asked Steve, interested.

Mitchell plunged into an explanation of the workings of the tariff and its effect on home prices. He had it at his fingers' end.

Under his skillful hands the dry subject became really interesting, embellished with a wealth of illustration and anecdote. He was still deep in his exposition, when, beyond Scranton, a hand was laid on his arm. A dapper, little, dark man, with twinkling, black eyes and pointed black beard, stood in the aisle.

"Well, Mitchell!" he said, with an affectionate pat. "Still riding your hobby?"

The fat man jumped up, beaming. "Loring! by all that's holy! Let me make you acquainted with my friend. Mr. Thompson—Mr. Loring. Mr. Loring is one of our rising young artists."

"The rising young artist," said Loring with a flash of white teeth, "is trying to get up a whist game, to pass away the time. Will you gentlemen assist?" He turned aside in a paroxysm of coughing.

"Certainly, certainly—that is, if Mr.

Thompson plays.—— That's a bad cough you've got there, Loring."

"Yes—caught cold fishing," said the artist. "Will you join us, Mr. Thompson?"

"Glad to," said that worthy. "Only my game is bumble-puppy. You can hardly call it whist. Who's the fourth?"

"Yet to be found," laughed Loring. After a few rebuffs they picked up a drummer, and adjourned to the smoker, buying a deck from the train boy. The little dark man and Steve played against the other two, a suitcase on their knees serving as a table. They played a rubber. Steve verified his statements as to his style of play.

"Well, that's enough—nearly in," said Loring, as they drew near their destination.

"Yes, indeed. I must go back to my car. We've had a pleasant game," said the fourth man, taking his leave.

"Have a smoke—you'll find these A 1,"

said the artist. "Say, Mitchell, I've learned a new trick to illustrate the old saying that the hand is quicker than the eye." Sticking a cigar in the corner of his mouth, he ran over the cards swiftly, took out the two red jacks, and held them up, one in each hand, backs toward himself, faces to Mitchell and Steve.

"Now," he said, "you can put these two jacks in the deck wherever you wish, shuffle them all you please, let me give them just one riffle, and you'll find them both together. He put his handkerchief to his lips and turned away to cough, laying the two jacks face downward on the table.

With a nudge to Steve, Mitchell threw the jack of hearts under Loring's seat, where it lay, face up, substituting therefor the five of clubs from the top of the deck.

Loring held the cards up again. "There are the two jacks, gentlemen: the two in-

separable jacks. Put them in for yourselves, and watch me—*close!*"

Steve took the five of clubs and put it in the middle. Mitchell put in the jack of diamonds. Both shuffled. Loring cut the pack into two equal parts, using only the extreme tip ends of his fingers, and shoved them together in the same fashion. Balancing the deck on the open palm of his left hand, he turned the cards carefully with his right thumb and forefinger, keeping up a running fire of comment.

"Now watch me! This trick won't work with any other cards but the jacks. The reason is easy to see. Where you find one knave there's always another close by. 'Birds of a feather flock together,' you know. Ah! here we are!" He turned over the knave of diamonds, and laid the deck down. "Now," he said to Mitchell, "what'll you bet the next card isn't the knave of hearts?" Here he

was again attacked by that excruciating cough.

As he turned away Mitchell slyly turned up the corner of the next card, winking at Steve. It was the five of clubs. Evidently Loring had done the trick right, except for the substituted card.

"I'll bet you five hundred dollars!" said Mitchell jubilantly. He drew out a billbook and shook a handful of notes at the artist. "A thousand, if you like!"

"Nobody wants to rob you, Mitchell," laughed Loring. "Put up your money. I don't need it. I'll do the trick, of course." Steve was laughing immoderately.

"Rob me! Go ahead! You're welcome!" said Mitchell, riotously radiant. He waved the bills before Loring's eyes. "Money talks! Yah! You haven't the nerve to bet on it," he taunted, his knee touching Steve's under the table.

Loring's black eyes snapped maliciously. "Oh, well, you insist on it," he said. "I've warned you now, remember! No rebate on this. How much?" He pulled out a fat rubber-banded roll and began stripping bills from the outside.

"A thousand—all you want!" shouted Mitchell, in high glee. "Getting on, Thompson?"

Steve, still laughing, shook his head. "I'll be stakeholder," he said in a choking voice.

The black-eyed man shot a malevolent glance at him as they put up the money in his hands. For he had a supernumerary jack of hearts, neatly palmed, to turn up if Steve "bit." This quickly disappeared, however, or rather did not appear at all. With an expectant smile the artist turned up from the top of the deck the five of clubs. He looked at it in stupefied amazement, which, if not real, was well invented.

Mitchell roared and pounded the suitcase. "Oh, *Loring!*" he gasped, drying his eyes. "You *will* teach an old dog new tricks, will you? My stars, but you're easy!" He took the cash from the grinning stakeholder, counted out Loring's half and pushed it over to that much discomfited gentleman. "I don't want to rob you!" he quoted mockingly. "But if I had time I'd have kept you on the anxious seat a while. There's your jack of hearts, under your feet!"

"Why, you fat, old swindler! You white-headed outrage—you—you Foxy Grandpa!" cried Loring in blushing chagrin—not wholly dissembled, either. "I ought to make you eat it. Come, have a drink." He led the way, the others following with gibe and jeer.

"Why didn't you bet with him, Thompson?" demanded Mitchell, still shaking with Homeric laughter. "Say, I should have kept

his money, by good rights. 'Twould have been the joke of the season!"

Steve raised his glass. "I would," he replied innocently, "but I knew you'd give it back, anyhow, so what's the use—among friends? If it had been a stranger, now, I'd 'a' hopped on the band-wagon too quick. I like a little easy money as well as anybody. Well, here's to our next meeting!"

"Hello!" said Mitchell. "Here's the tunnel and Hoboken. Let's go back to our belongings. 'Now, Thompson, business first and pleasure after, you know. You take the Barclay Street boat. If I don't get time to see you before noon to-morrow you run up to the office and see me. It's only a block from the Cornucopia. I've got to go the other way, and so does Loring—at least his studio's uptown. I say, Loring, tell Mr. Thompson what's doing at the theatres. That's in your line."

Loring named several plays, recommending one as particularly good. In the waiting-room they parted with warm handshakings and great good-will.

"Do you suppose he's wise?" said Loring, on the ferry.

Mitchell guffawed. "That bumpkin? Not he. The poor, dumb idiot took it all as a practical joke among friends. Naturally, just as he said, he thought I'd give you your money back. Glad you had presence of mind enough to go on through with the five-spot. It's fine business to be able to think on your feet, especially for us moon-minions. Good thing it turned out the way it did. He's got perfect confidence in me now—he's seen me tried, and *knows* I'm straight. We'll get more out of him in the long run." He explained Steve's mining expectations at length.

"I don't like it much," said Loring. "It's

a bad sign. My experience is that it's hard to overreach a man that isn't on the hog himself. When they're eager to annex something dishonestly you get 'em every time. Maybe you'll lose him. Why didn't you stay with him? He may not go to the Cornucopia at all."

"Oh, yes, he will!" said Mitchell confidently. "I am going to play him for all he's worth, and I want him to feel sure I'm O. K. It might make him suspicious if I kept at his coat tails. Plenty of time. I won't even look him up to-morrow. Rig the old joint as my office, and wait there till he hunts me up. Let him make all the advances, d'ye see? Teach him bridge, on the square, at night. Let him win a little—just enough to keep him satisfied with himself—*you*'ll see. Wait till he draws his wad, and we'll throw the gaff in him to the queen's taste. If he won't nibble at one hook

try another. But, I say, Billy, you'll have to furnish the scads for bait, in case he don't rise to something easy. I know you're flush from that Manning job."

Meantime, with unspoiled and sparkling eye, the inlander saw, broad sweeping before him, mist-bordered, dream-vast, dim-seen beneath the lowering sky, the magic city whose pulsings send and call a nation's life-blood.

The salt tang of the sea was in his nostrils; greetings, many-keyed, hoarse-whistled by plying craft, were in his ears; creamy-foamed wakes of turbulent keels, swift-sent or laboring, boiled their swirling splendor against the black water. Mysterious, couchant, straining, the bulwarked city rode the waves; a mighty ship, her funnels the great buildings beyond, where sullen streamers of smoke trailed motionless and darkling; the

indescribable, multitudinous hum of the city's blended voices for purring of monster engines, deep in her hold; bold and high, her restless prow swung seaward in majestic curve, impatient to beat to open main.

This simple young man actually found impressiveness, glamour, even beauty, in this eye-filling canvas; the crowding of crashing lights and interwoven shadows, massed, innumerable, bewildering; the turmoil of confused and broken line, sprawled with tremendous carelessness for a giant's delight.

Plainer proof of his utter unsophistication could not be. For it is traditional with all "correct" and well-informed folk that New York is hopelessly ugly. It gives one such a superior air to disprize with easy scorn this greatest of the Gateways of the World.

Chapter IV.

"A good plot, good friends, and full of expectation: an excellent plot, very good friends."

STEVE went, not to a theatre, but to bed. In the morning, after a few inquiries, he sauntered round to get his bearings. He made these explorations afoot, opining that, at first, the use of street cars or the "L" would tend to confuse his orientation. He contented himself with locating 25 Broad Street, without presenting his letter. Incidentally, he left most of his cash in a safe-deposit drawer. "For," he mused, "the touching attachment of my open-handed, prepossessing friend may not always adhere to the lofty plane recognized by business ethics. He may, at any time, abandon the refined and artistic methods of high fi-

nance for primitive, crude and direct means unworthy of his talents. The safe side of a safe is the inside of a safe."

So back by the water-front, where he spent a pleasant and interesting forenoon. At one o'clock there were still no signs of Mitchell. So Steve, Mahomet-like, sought his office.

The *mise-en-scene* was admirable. A well-littered desk, two 'phones, code-book, directory, typewriter, file-books, a busy book-keeper, a fair stenographer—no detail was omitted. Mitchell, pacing the floor, paused in his dictation to give him a cheerful greeting.

"Hello, Thompson—up already? Just sit down till I'm through here, will you? Most done. How'd you like to walk around the docks? That ought to interest you. All right—thought it would. I've got some business at No. 4. Make yourself at home.

There's the papers—Ready, Miss Stanley?" Clearing his throat, he put a hand under his coat-tails and resumed dictation:

"'Melquiades Sandoval y Hijos, Montevidio. Gentlemen: Your order shipped today by steamer Escobar as per your esteemed favor of the 5th. Invoices inclosed. In the item of mowing machines, was unable to fill order with Nonpareil as desired. Have taken liberty of substituting fifty Micas, the Mica being the same in every respect except the name plate. In fact, the two firms, with others, have a "gentleman's agreement" sharing patents, keeping up separate plants only to preserve the appearance of competition. (Confound it—excuse me, Miss Stanley—there's my hobby again. Shouldn't have said that, but let it go.) Trusting you will find this satisfactory in every particular, and hoping to be favored by your future orders, I am, etc.'—Got that? Next!

"'Brown, Small & VanRiper, Hartford, Ct. Gentlemen: Inclosed find my check for $27,000, to be used in the matter we discussed the other day. Kindly send papers to my lawyers, Reed, Reed, Perkins & Reed.

"'Am sorry I cannot more largely avail myself of the privilege so kindly extended me. At the present, however, my capital is tied up in various enterprises, and I am really crowding myself to raise this. Thanking you for past favors, etc.'—Here's the last. 'Mr. Joseph Yates, Rehobeth Beach, Delaware. Dear old Joe: Sorry to hear of your undeserved bad luck. While not exactly a financial Napoleon these days, I am able to accommodate you, and glad to do so. Have not forgotten the time you helped me out of a mighty tight place. Draw on me for $10,000 through the Marine. Take your time for repayment. If this is not

enough, let me know. Kind regards to the wife—and take care of yourself, old man. In haste, your old friend——'

"Pound those off, Miss Stanley. Jim"—this to the silently industrious bookkeeper—"how much have we got at the Marine?"

After swift search in a little black book the bookkeeper looked up—"Seven thousand six hundred-twenty, sir," he replied respectfully.

"I'll give you enough to make out ten thousand to honor old Joe's draft," ruminated Mitchell, twirling the safe-knobs deftly. "You take it round and deposit it. On your way back jack Stevens up about those plows. Tell him if he don't get 'em round on time he loses one big customer—and that's me." Counting out the required amount, he stuffed the slight remainder in his pocket, slammed shut the safe, signed his

letters briskly, and took up his hat. "Come on, Thompson, we'll be off."

"Now then," he resumed, in the elevator, "I've got to go down to slip No. 4, to see about some stuff I'm shipping to Mexico. Walk or ride? It's only a little ways."

"Let's walk, then," said Steve. "You can tell me about the boats as we go. That's what takes my eye. What's that big one coming in?"

"Rotterdammer. The one behind her is a coaster—Menacho, Puig & Co. Look up stream—there's a big Cunarder just swinging out. Hello, there's the Rosenthal and Montoya stuff now!"

A string of heavily-laden drays moved slowly down the rock-paved street. "Lights out! Protect yourself!" thought Steve. "I feel a presentiment that there'll be a heavy transportation bill on that stuff and that my friend won't have enough cash to settle it.

Perhaps he will accept a temporary accommodation from me. Thompson, he pays the freight—*nit!*"

This unworthy suspicion proved unfounded. As they watched the rumbling wagons they were joined by one of businesslike appearance and swift step.

"Going down, Mitchell? That's your Argentine freights, I suppose? At least, I recognize your foreman."

Mitchell introduced him: Mr. Archibald, of the Bowring and Archibald line, in the coastwise and southern trade.

"Just going down to your place, Archie. We *were* going to walk, but if you're in a hurry——"

"Not at all. Have a cigar?" said the pseudo-Archibald urbanely.

"You can show my young friend over the boats, if you will," said Mitchell. "Rank inlander, Thompson. Rather look at a boat

than eat. Been talking boat, boat, boat to me ever since we left the office."

"Happy to do so," said the merchant-mariner. "You'd better take a little trip with us, Mr. Thompson—say a run down to Havana. Any friend of Mr. Mitchell's——"

A young man came tearing across the street at a great rate. "Mitchell!" he shouted. "Mitchell! Look here!" He thrust a telegram into Mitchell's hand. "Just reached me by A. D. T. from the Carlton. Let me have some money, will you? About three thousand. Just got time to catch the next Pennsylvania train and make connections at Baltimore."

Mitchell spread out the yellow slip and read it aloud. "H'm! 'Ponce de Leon St Augustine Florida John E Bickford The Carlton New York—Come at once Father worse Doctor orders to Egypt Jennie.' Why

sure, my boy. Here's what cash I got, and I'll give you a check. Too bad, too bad! By George, I hope your dad pulls through. What! Blame it, I mean dammit, I've come off without my checkbook. Got yours, Archie?"

Archie patted his pockets. "No, I haven't. Left it in the office. Got a couple of hundred cash you're welcome to, though."

The young man looked nervously at his watch. Mitchell turned hesitatingly toward Thompson. But the Westerner did not wait for an appeal to his generosity. He volunteered, eager to oblige a man of such large affairs as his substantial friend.

"I'll write you a check. You can just run in to the nearest bank with me and indorse it, Mr. Mitchell. Sorry I haven't the cash with me." Thus Steve, his clumsy innocence eluding the toils with all the grace of an agile hippopotamus.

The grafters glanced at each other. But Mitchell was equal to the emergency.

"No need to bother you, Mr. Thompson, thanks, all the same," he said suavely. "Archibald, just give me what you've got and I'll run over to Jersey City with John. Traffic Manager of the Pennsylvania is a friend of mine. If he's in his office I'll get it of him. Otherwise, I'll start John on, and wire balance to him at St. Augustine when I get back. Wait a minute, John. Got plenty of time to catch the boat. Look here, Archie—you're not busy, are you?"

"I'm always busy," said the shipowner gayly, "but no more so to-day than any other day. Why?"

"Oh, well, you can get off. I promised Thompson, here, to do him the honors, and now I've got to help John out. Oh, you two are not acquainted, are you? Ex*cuse* me! Mr. Archibald, Mr. Bickford—Mr. Thomp-

son, Mr. Bickford. Mr. Bickford's father was a dear old friend of mine. Once very wealthy, too, but has had reverses. Bless me, how I do ramble on! Old age, sir, old age! Osler was half right. Now, Archie, 'phone up to your office that you're unavoidably detained and all the rest of it, like a good fellow, and take my place as cicerone. Never mind your dinky little boats—take him up and show him the big fellows—the ocean greyhounds."

"But," objected Archibald, "I've got to go down to the office to get some money. You've broke me, you shanghaier."

"So I have, so I have!" He peeled off a hundred-dollar-bill, ignoring Steve's protest. "That enough? I'll fix John up, some way. You're at Mr. Thompson's orders. Mind, his money isn't any good. I pay for both of you. Wish it was more, but you see how I'm hooked up. You'll have a better time

with a young fellow like Archie than you would with an old fogy like me, anyhow. Here, we'll be left!" He made for the ferry slips with the anxious Bickford.

Thus did the wily Mr. Mitchell justify his headship. In these profuse strains of unpremeditated art, apparently the merest of rambling commonplace, he had plainly conveyed to his henchmen that, though foiled by the countryman's straightforward single-mindedness, they were not to adopt a policy of scuttle, but persevere in the paths of manifest destiny to benevolent assimilation; at the same time adroitly extricating his embarrassed lieutenant from a very present predicament. Because "Archibald" felt a certain reluctance about accompanying Steve to Pier Number 4 in the capacity of owner, for the sufficiently obvious reason that he might be summarily kicked off. Such a contretemps might give cause for conjecture

even in one so green as his companion, reflected Archie.

He saluted with easy grace. "Orders, captain? Happy to oblige. My friend's friend is my friend."

Steve saw the big steamships. Thence, at his artless suggestion, they went to Brooklyn Bridge. Followed rides on the Subway and Elevated, a viewing of skyscrapers and such innocent and exhilarating delights. Noting Archibald's well-groomed and natty appearance, Steve naively asked his advice in matters sartorial, purchasing much raiment and leaving an order with a fashionable tailor. But, after an amazing dinner at an uptown house of call, Archibald took the reins into his own guidance, and led him forth to quite other distractions—in the agricultural quarter of the city, where that popular and ever-blooming cereal, wild oats, is sown by night and by day.

Behind them the plausible Mr. Mitchell and his old friend's son held high commune.

"Why, the lantern-jawed, bug-eyed, rubber-necked, double-jointed, knock-kneed, splay-foot, hair-lipped, putty-brained country Jake! Did you see him sidestep that?" demanded the aggrieved Bickford, forgetting, in his pique, his stricken father. "What you want to do to him is to sandbag him, give him knockout drops, stab him under the fifth rib! He's too elusive—the devil-sent——" He was proceeding to further particulars when Mitchell checked him.

"I want you to bear in mind that this is no strong-arm gang, and I'm neither dip nor climber." His emphasis was withering. "My credit is involved in this affair now, and I'm going through with it. If he'd had the dough with him he'd handed it out just like he did the check. He floundered out through pure, unadulterated innocence. I'll

land him yet. Next time I won't leave the shirt to his back. I tried him with covetousness. I've tried him with distress. Now I'll tempt him with a business opportunity—one that he'll have to have cash for. Keep your eye on your uncle. He'll see you through."

The next day being Sunday, Mitchell took the cowboy to the Speedway, and back through Central Park, in an auto, frankly hired.

"I can hardly afford to set up one," he confided. "And anyway, I haven't much leisure. Of course, when a good fellow like you comes along I can take a day off, once in a way. But generally my nose is down to the grindstone."

On their way home he pointed out a fine building, ornamented with a "To Let" sign in the window. "There's a place I used to own, Thompson," he said. "Belongs to a

friend of mine, young Post. One of the best families—but, poor fellow, he's in trouble now." He dismissed the subject with a benevolent sigh. "Would you like to go in and look at it? The caretaker will show it to you. He'll think you're a prospective buyer. You needn't tell him so, but then again you needn't tell him any different. There's no harm and it's well worth seeing."

Thompson, nothing loth, agreed. It was a fine house, as Mitchell had guessed.

"Gracious!" said Steve, when the inspection was over. "What's such a house worth?"

"I sold it for forty thousand. It's worth more now."

Steve gazed at him wide-eyed. "My! I shouldn't have thought it worth that much." (It was, in fact, worth a great deal more.)

"It's the ground that makes it cost so," explained Mitchell. "That's why the value

has increased. The house itself is not worth as much as when I had it, but land values are coming up by leaps and bounds. Young man, the ground valuation alone of the six square miles adjoining Central Park is more than the value of all real estate in the great commonwealth of Missouri. And it is going higher every year."

"I don't understand it," said Steve, much impressed.

"Do you understand the philosophy of an artesian well? Yes? Then you understand this. Every farm cleared, every acre planted, every mine developed, every baby born, enhances the value of *all* city property—and New York's got the biggest standpipe. The back country soaks up the rain and it is delivered conveniently at our doors through underground channels, between the unleaking walls that confine its flow; our price on the surplus you have to sell and *our* price

on the necessities you buy. Every city taps this flow, be the pipe large or small; and as I said before, New York has the biggest gusher.

"We've got the money. So you may do the work and we allow you to get enough to sustain life, and just as little more as possible. Sell at our price, buy at our price—we've got you coming and going. You can't get away.

"You're poor, you take what you can get to pay your debts. That keeps down prices on what you sell. You've got families, you've got to play. Yes, yes, quite right, the rules are not *entirely* fair; we'll revise them to-morrow, maybe, some time. Let *you* do it? Tut, tut, no, no! Why, you object to 'em! That won't do at all. Let the rules be revised by their friends and beneficiaries, to-morrow, next day, by and by; busy to-day, stockholders' meeting, divi-

dend declared, good-by! You're virtually *peons*. Fourth of July, elections and war-times you're the sovereign people, Tommy this and Tommy-rot; but for all practical purposes you're *peons*.

"We're rich, we can afford a scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours tariff that keeps our prices up arbitrarily, that takes fifty dollars out of your pockets to put in ours for every dollar it puts into the national treasury."

"If the tariff was repealed," said Steve diffidently, "if we raised money for the National Government, just as we do for county government——"

"Hush-sh!" said Mitchell, shocked. "That's High Treason—that's Unconstitutional! Some one will hear you! Then there's another. *You* sell at a sacrifice to pay your debts. If we get in debt that's exactly what we won't do. A poor man goes

broke, but a rich man goes bankrupt. Ever think of that?

"That baby I spoke of will grow up, produce corn, cotton, cattle or copper, maybe—but the net result of his life will be to enrich the rich. If, by any means—industry, opportunity, invention, speculation, dishonesty, chance or inheritance—he gets on top, then the workers will be working for him by the same law. The fact remains that every dollar's worth of betterment in the country increases the value of city property one dollar, without effort to the owner. A city is an artesian well. Take it from me, Thompson, a man of your ability ought to make connections and get your little tin pail under."

Chapter VI

"A man so various that he seemed to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome."

THOMPSON sat in his room alone, meditating on Mitchell, statesman and Political Economist. On the table lay his letter of introduction and his bad "Souvenir" dollar.

"The meeting will please come to order!" he said, rapping the table smartly. "The Gentleman from Montana has the floor."

"I move you, Mr. Chairman," said the Gentleman from Montana, "that the letter of introduction be laid upon the table, and that this House do now go into Committee of putting the other fellows in the Hole."

No objection being heard, this was done. Steve stared at the tabled letter with a puzzled frown.

"Gentlemen, the Chair awaits your pleasure," he announced, at last. "Have you any suggestions to make?"

The Gentleman from Montana again obtained recognition.

"Mr. Speaker, I see here present an ex-member, my *alter ego,* Mr. Reuben Rubber-Neck, who once parted with six months' wages on another man's game. Mr. Rubber-Neck is a graduate of the celebrated and expensive school of Experience, of which it is written that a large and influential class will learn of no other. As an ex-Member, he is entitled to the privilege of the floor. I, for one, would like to have his counsels at this juncture."

Thus appealed to, Mr. Rubber-Neck got stumblingly to his feet with a gawky and timid demeanor.

"Mr. Chairman, it is not a theory but a hell of a condition that confronts us," he

said, uncertainly. "I think that we should use the letter so providentially er—um—provided to make friends with the mammon of righteousness. Two heads are proverbially better than one, if one *is* an Expert. It behooves us, for the sake of the near and dear kinsmen, the Mark brothers, that we should so bear ourselves toward our generous hosts as to make them feel that they have entertained a devil unawares. Avenge now the innumerable wrongs of me and my likes. Before deciding on our line of action, however, I should like to hear from a learned gentleman in our midst, whose brain is ever fertile in expedients. I refer to the only one of us who has been through college —in at the front door and out the back. I call on the representative of the class of Naughty-naughty!"

He sat down amid vociferous cries of "Hear! Hear!"

The Bookman arose gracefully. "While I thank the gentleman who has preceded me for his encomiums," he said, with deprecatory modesty, "yet I can lay no claim for scholastic honors, owing to an unfortunate difference of opinion with the Faculty in the scorching question of turning state's evidence concerning the ebullition of class feeling, in which I was implicated by a black eye or so. I fought the good fight, I kept the faith, but I did not finish my course. But to return to our sheep.

"In every crisis, I have always found precedent for action in the words of the immortal Swan of Avon. What does Will say? He says:

'Put money in thy purse!'

"Follows naturally the advice of the melancholy Dane, bearing directly on the case in hand:

'Let it work.
For 'tis the sport to see the engineer
Hoist with his own petard.'

"Again,

'Look on this picture, then on that!
The counterfeit.'

"Where is that counterfeit, anyhow?" He took from his pocket a good silver dollar, compared it thoughtfully with the bad one on the table, and continued.

"What else? Why, this:

'Art thou not horribly afeared? . . . Could the world pick thee three such enemies again as that fiend Douglas, that spirit Percy, and that devil Glendower?'

"Having thus pointed out the danger, he plainly indicates the remedy:

'Where shall I find one that will steal well? O! for a fine thief of the age of two-or-three and twenty! I am heinously unprovided.'

"Gentlemen, in my opinion we need three things. First, the services of a skillful and discreet silversmith. Second, a pair of eye-glasses fitted with a powerful microscopic lens, able to distinguish good from evil. Third, a confederate who can steal well, such as we can doubtless find in or about Broad Street. By these simple and feasible means we shall be enabled to whip-saw our redoubtable opponents or, to use the local term, 'give 'em the double-cross.' "

He sat down amid boisterous applause.

"The Watch-dog of the Treasury!" said Steve icily. The Watch-dog stood apologetically, twisting nervous fingers together. "It strikes me, Mr. Speaker," he stammered, "that my eminent colleague might aptly have quoted from the same high authority two maxims in praise of prudence. 'Discretion is the better part of valor,' he says, and also,

'He who fights and runs away
Will live to fight another day.'

"It appears to me the part of prudence——"

Here he was howled down by disapproving groans.

"The Chair will take great pleasure in recognizing the Gentleman from New Mexico," suggested Steve, with a gracious nod.

Wildcat Thompson, cowboy, sprang to his feet; lithe, active, eager. Swiftness, alertness, poise, certainty were in every line of his splendid body. His was the assured, resourceful bearing of the man of action, whose hands have kept his head, contrasting sharply with the Miner's heavy and tentative slowness, the awkward self-consciousness of the Easy One, the Objector's furtive and apprehensive manner, or the Near-Collegian's languid affectation of dilettantism.

"Be a sport!" He threw out a hand, his

confident voice ringing with decision. "We are seven!—(or at least we will be when we pick up a financier at Atwood's). Get together! Let us adopt our learned brother's ingenious device. Should fraud fail, we can always fall back on——

'the simple plan
That eack should take who hath the power
And he should keep that can.'

"As alternative, or, I should say, as reserve, I offer—this!" A swift gleam of silver and steel: he laid a cocked .45 beside the other exhibits.

"The sword of Brennus! Woe to the vanquished!" murmured the School-man, when the cheering had abated. "Mr. Chairman, the amendment is accepted."

The entire meeting then lit a cigarette.

The Chair arose, using the six-shooter as gavel. "Gentlemen, have you anything more

to offer? If not will you hear the question? Is it the sense of this meeting that united we fall upon this infamous coalition with the jaw bone of an ass and get their money; dishonestly if we can, and if not, then by main strength and awkwardness? Those in favor of the motion will please rise. I am unanimous, and it is so ordered. This resolution will be spread all over the minutes, right off. The Chair will appoint as committee to get a move on, Mr. Stephen Thompson of Montana; the earnest Shakespearian student, Mr. Thompson-Stephen; Mr. Wildcat Thompson of New Mexico; and myself. Having no further use for a sucker or a quitter, the other two gentlemen may go to the devil, and I hereby stand adjourned."

So saying, he gathered up his resources and departed.

At a later hour Steve presented himself in a body to the senior Atwood, with his letter from the Judge as credentials.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated that person, when he had read a few lines. His eyes dropped to the signature. "Oh—the Judge!" he said, enlightened, and read on, chuckling.

He wheeled his chair around. "Well, Mr. Thompson, what is it—fine or bail?" he queried.

"I want to borrow a man," Steve began mildly. Here he was interrupted. The ante-room door opened. One entered—no, floated in—faultlessly arrayed, with an air at once languid and gloomy.

"Wyatt!" said Atwood, cordially. "Man! You're good for sore eyes! What fair wind blows you here?"

Wyatt sank into a chair. "Doldwums. Nothing at all," he said listlessly. "Mewest

chawnce, I assuah you. Fawct is, I was—er —howwidly boahed, y' know. It's no good. All of it!" He spread out his immaculate pink palm in a comprehensive gesture. "All wot!—Dinnahs and dawnces and bwidge, the hawse-show—and—ah—all the west of it. —Vahnity fawr, y' know. If you have whatevah you want diwectly, of cow'se you cawnt want anything you daunt have, y' know. Doocid unpleasant. I find myself like the boy that wanted to leah'n to shivah and shake, y' know. Needin' the excitement of what this fellah—ah—at Washington, y' know—*Woosevelt!*—of what Woosevelt calls the stwenuous life. Saht in the club thinkin' it ovah, and decided to sally fowth to seek adventuah——"

"Adventure! You?" Atwood threw back his head and roared.

"—adventuah. In a hansom," returned the new-comer placidly. "So the dwivah

ahsked me 'Whah to?' y' know. I was feelin' nawsty enough, so I told him 'To pwugatowy!'—like that! He was—ah—a vewy litewal-minded puhson." There was a faint flicker of amusement in his gray eyes. "He—ah—bwought me to the Stock Exchange. Aftah I got out, y' know, I wemembahed that you—ah—did something heah. So I thought I'd just wun ovah and see you." He relapsed into moody silence.

"You've come to the right shop, I do believe," said Atwood. "Mr. Thompson, let me make you acquainted with my old friend Wyatt."

"Chawmed, I'm suah!" muttered Wyatt, adjusting his monocle.

"You have probably heard of him," pursued Atwood. "He appears regularly in the Sunday Supplements as a Horrible Example—Anson Walworth Wyatt, nephew to his uncle. But for all he seems such a silly,

supercilious ass, he's a good old chap at heart, a 'weal' lion in an ass-skin. Mr. Thompson, have I permission to share this letter with my friend?"

"Why not?" said Steve.

"This is a Western man's business letter," explained Atwood. The clubman listened with a well-bred stony stare.

"Aw!" he said. "How *vewy* extwaohdinawy!"

"Now, old fellow, Mr. Thompson was just about to negotiate the loan of a man from me when you came. Here we have the adventure seeking the man, and the man seeking the adventure. It sounds promising. Of course, I shall expect a commission both ways. Now give us your plans and specifications, Mr. Thompson."

"I want to borrow a young man, as I said before, of good appearance"—with a glance at Wyatt's sumptuous apparel—"and some

little brains"—another and a sharper glance, "One who will obey orders if he breaks owners, who will stand without being tied, and who doesn't especially care whether school keeps or not. I would particularly request that he leave his money, his memory, acquired good habits, if any, and his conscience, in your safe-keeping till he is returned."

"That sounds like the makings of a pretty adventure, Wyatt," said Atwood, delighted. "Are you for loan, old chap?"

Wyatt laid his affectation aside. "That depends on the interest, the security, and length of the term. It certainly appears, from your very flattering description, that you were searching for me, Mr. Thompson." His eyes were dancing.

"Interest from the word Go. The security's all right, too, if you take a gun," said Steve reassuringly. "You *might* get a long

term, but it can be avoided with luck and good management. I think the parties concerned will hardly make a complaint."

"You are not contemplating anything illegal, I trust?" Atwood was enjoying himself to the full.

"I don't know. Really hadn't given it much attention," returned the Committee, simply. "But now you mention it, I think probably I am."

"Will you allow my accomplice and myself to use your private room for executive session?" asked Wyatt.

. . . . .

"But why don't you have them arrested?"

"Arrested? O no!" cried Steve, in pained surprise. "That wouldn't be fair. That isn't done! Besides, don't you see, that wouldn't hurt their feelings like this?"

"I see," said Wyatt. "I'm your man. And I say, old chap, before I go back to my

Cholly-talk again, advise me. Would I look any more idiotic, do you think, if I should suck my cane? I don't want to disappoint any one."

"I would not," said Steve. "You're too good to be true, without that."

"Wouldn't you naturally suppose," sighed Wyatt, "that people would know that no man could be as big a fool as I am, unless he did it on purpose? But they don't. They swallow it, hook, bob and sinker!"

Chapter VI

"If the bowl had been stronger
My tale had been longer."

STEVE entered Mitchell's office with the painful uprightness and precise carriage of one who has lunched not wisely but rather too well. His speech, too, was of ponderous brevity. The man of affairs chided him with fatherly kindness.

"This won't do, my boy—this won't do. I like you, Thompson. I'm sorry—I'm pained to see this. Don't go in for this sort of thing, or your good fortune will prove a curse in disguise."

Steve hung his head, muttering something incoherent about not being used to wine and that he'd soon get over it.

"Oh, young men *will* be young men, I suppose," sighed Mitchell tolerantly. "Tell you what. Archibald's going for a spin over to East New York. I'll just 'phone him to drop by on his way and take us along. Fresh air'll do you good."

Steve assented, and fell to poring over the immense wall map of New York with preternatural gravity.

But Mitchell's benevolent plan was doomed to be frustrated. Hardly had Archibald arrived and the employees been dismissed, when the sordid, busy, money-making city intruded in the person of Loring.

There were merry greetings all around. The artist was much pleased to renew his acquaintance with Thompson, to whom he had taken a fancy. Loring, it seemed, was an old friend of Archibald's and was promptly invited to make one of the party.

"Oh, I can't," demurred Loring. "And I

hate to spoil sport, but I've got a good thing which must be put through to-night or not at all. I ran in to get Mitchell to handle it for me. I've got the opportunity, but not the wherewithal." He made the candid admission with a delightful smile.

"I fear that you are leaning on a mighty nearly broken reed," said Mitchell. "I'm all tied up in money matters this week. But spit it out, anyhow. I've got six or seven thousand loose. If it's more than that perhaps Archie can swing it—if it's a safe proposition."

"Safe as United States bonds, and good for thirty per cent. profit. Come back, Thompson!" Steve was making for the door, with apologies. "You're not in the way a bit. Sit down, man! Your six thousand won't be a starter, Joe. I've got some four thousand myself, in red, red gold. All I have in the world—wish it was more." His

blithe insouciance was irresistibly charming.

"Get down to business, old fellow," said Archibald. "What's the lay?"

"This is all confidential, between gentlemen, you understand?" All nodded. "You know young Post is in hiding? Well, I've been in touch with him all along. He's tired of skulking and wants me to sell that house his mother left him, strictly on the Q. T. He's got a chance to slip away on a private yacht to-night. Said I could have all I could get over thirty thousand. It's worth fifty, at least. I know where I could get forty-five, but I dare not approach those people now, because they are unfriendly to Post and would make him trouble. Once he is safely away——" He waved his hand.

"That ought to be a good thing," said Archibald thoughtfully. "It rents for six thousand a year, and values going up. I've a good mind to go into it for a permanent

investment. Let's see—he'd want spot cash, wouldn't he?"

"Naturally. Cash on the nail. He could hardly afford to be identified, you know."

"Can't raise that much to-day," said the shipowner. "Maybe, by borrowing from my partner, I could get enough to pool with you and Mitchell. What's your proposition? About cutting profits, I mean."

"I think I should have ten per cent. net, besides the proportionate earning of my four thousand—for giving you fellows the first chance. There's plenty would jump at it."

"That's fair enough," said Archibald. "Mr. Thompson, you will excuse us? Our trip will only be postponed. I'll have to fly around to rustle ready money. I'll see Bowring first."

"Hold on," said Mitchell. "Why don't

you let my friend in on this? He's got the scads, and he's a good fellow."

"Oh, he would have to go and see the place," objected Archibald, his eye evidently on the main chance.

"No, he won't. We looked it over yesterday. I showed it to him because I used to live there. Don't be selfish, Archie. There's plenty of chances for you to make money. Get your pail, Thompson!"

"We-ll," said Archibald grudgingly. "So long as it's not sure that Bowring can spare me the money, let him take over a third if he wants to."

"Sure I do," grinned the prospective buyer, highly elated, "and much obliged to you, too, Mr. Archibald.

"That's all right," said that person gruffly. "Now then, Loring, come out of it! Time's flying. Where? When? How?

Never saw an artist yet that could think on straight lines," he grumbled.

"All of you get your money, meet at Mitchell's rooms. I'll let Post know and join you there later. We'll wait till dark, get a tried and acquitted notary of my acquaintance, slip around to Post's lair after dark and do the deed. I'll stand a ripping dinner for the bunch out of my ten per cent. Put deed on record to-morrow morning. That'll give him start enough. Is that all clear?"

"Clear as a bell. I'm off!" said Archibald.

"Archie's a good sort, but he does hate to let a dollar get by him." The artist laughed indulgently. "I say, Thompson, did you see how he stuck on letting you have a whack at it?"

"Where do you bank?" inquired Mitchell. Steve told him where his money was depos-

ited. Mitchell shook his head. "I was hoping we would go the same way, but I go uptown."

Ten minutes after they left the industrious bookkeeper returned with navvies and draymen, and removed the office furniture to parts unknown.

When the four financiers got together in Mitchell's room Steve proposed to continue his lessons in the fascinating game of bridge.

He drank freely and his game was the apotheosis of bumble-puppy. Archibald, his partner, was much irritated by his stupidity.

A bellboy came to the door. A gentleman in the parlor would like to see Mr. Thompson.

Mr. Thompson looked at the card. "Mr. A. W. Wyatt," he announced sneeringly. "You can tell Mr. A. W. Wyatt, if he wants

to see me, he can just naturally mosey himself up here."

"Not *the* A. W. Wyatt—Anson Walworth Wyatt?" asked Loring. "I know him—I mean, I know him by sight."

"I believe it is," said Steve with surly indifference. "If you know him, you know an overbearing jabberwock. He's head devil of the push that bought the Copperbottom and I don't like his style even a little bit. He seems to think I'm the dirt under his feet. *I'll* show him. *I* know what he wants, and that's the other fourth of my mine." He thumped the table viciously. "He'll pay for all he gets from *me,* I'll tell you that."

Mr. Wyatt was ushered in; irreproachable, flawless, exquisite. ("It's him!" breathed Loring.) He remained standing, hat in hand, fitted his glass with vacuous care and surveyed the room with deliberate-

ly insolent scrutiny. Thompson kept his seat, fairly prickling with antagonism. The others rose with exemplary good breeding.

"Aw!" said the newcomer, after an eloquent pause. "Mistah—er—Townsend, cawn I have a few moments of quite pwivate convehsation with you?"

"No, you cawnt!" retorted Thompson truculently. "Sit down, boys. Sit down, I say! These gentlemen are my friends. Anything you got to say? If there is, say it. And my name's *Thompson,* if you please."

"Aw!—what an *extwemely* wemahkable ahttitude!" Wyatt fixed his monocle on the offending miner with bland and exasperating condescension. "Weally, you quite intewest me, y' know! I appwoach you, quite civilly, y' know, with an offah decidedly to youah ahdvahntage, Mistah—ah—Tomlinson, and you tweat it——"

"*Thompson!!* By Heavens, you say Tomlinson again and I'll pound your face into shape!" roared the misnamed one, jumping up. Mitchell and Loring vainly tried to quiet him.

"Weally, I shall be obwiged to wefeh you to my lawyehs——" Wyatt began.

"Refer *me*—you animated outrage—you libel! Turn me loose, you fellows! *I* don't want to see *you* or your durn lawyers! I know what *you* want, well enough. You want to bamboozle me into selling my interest in the Copper-bottom for less than it's worth. Here's my last word to you—Mr.—ah—White! If you want my fourth at forty thousand, to-day, all right. It's worth more—it's paid from the grass-roots down. But that'll make me the round six figures, and that's enough. *I* can make money—*I* know *my* little way about," he boasted, with insufferable complacency.

"Nobody left me *my* pile! Put up or shut up!"

"Mr. Wyatt," said Mitchell, "pardon me, but may I suggest that you call at a more favorable time?" He made, behind Thompson's back, the motion significant of an emptied glass.

"Aw! I see—I *see!* Thawnks awfully for the hint. Good-evening, gentlemen—and—ah—Mistah Tomkins!"

Thompson broke away, shaking his fist in Wyatt's face. "Say that again and I'll brain you—pawdon me, I should say, I'll smash your head in. Thompson's my name—T-h-o-m-p-s-o-n, *Thompson!* And you trade with me, now or never!"

"You see, gentlemen?" Wyatt appealed. "Mistah—ah—Tawmson, I offahed you twenty-five thousand on my own wesponsibility, as a—ah—business pwoposition. My—ah—associawates in this undehtaking aw

all fwiends, quite congenwial, y' know, and I felt suah they would sanction that. I do not cyah to go futheh lengths without—ah—a confewence with them, as I believe that pwice quite ahmple, y' know. But if I could awwange fo' an option——"

"You pay me twenty thousand, cash, in this room, at eight o'clock to-night, and I'll give you an option for one week at forty thousand," persisted the morose miner. "After that, the price goes up."

"Fifty pehcentum down on an option! This is uttehly unpwecedented, y' know. I must wemonstwate, weally!"

"It's all the option you'll get from me, you jackanapes." He snapped contemptuous fingers under Wyatt's nose.

Wyatt buttoned his coat with dignity. "Weally, this pahsses all bounds!" he ejaculated. "Gentlemen, I accept this—ah—puhson's offeh. I cannot enduah such an

associwate. You ah all witnesses. May I ahsk you-ah names, and may I wequest youah pwesence to-night, both to ensuah the —ar—fulfillment of the vehbal contwact which you have heahd, and to pwevent the wepetition of this scandalous scene?" He opened the door. "Aw wevoah, gentlemen!" By this time he was in the elevator. From this coign of vantage he sent a Parthian shaft.

"Till eight o'clock, Mistah—ah—Tomkinson!"

The three held the raging Thompson with some mutual dishevelment. They soothed him with flattery, stayed him with flagons, for he yearned for blood with a great yearning.

"Listen to your friends, boy," urged Mitchell. "Take his money, and don't do anything you'll be sorry for. Make out your papers and pay no attention to what

he says. Come, brace up! It'll be time for dinner in a jiffy. Promise us not to drink any more, and not to make any trouble, or we'll 'phone him not to come."

Steve allowed himself to be pacified at last, but he regarded his mitigators with a malignant eye.

"Here's what I owe you on bridge, Mitchell—twenty-three dollars," he said sullenly. "Archibald can settle with Loring. *I* don't want no dinner—I'm going to sleep."

"Oh, come on now, that's a good fellow," purred Mitchell, picking up the two bills and the coins. "Say, old man—you haven't turned counterfeiter, have you?" he said good-naturedly. "This one's N. G."

Steve took it clumsily. "It's no such thing," he blurted. "Good as gold. Take it or leave it. I don't care."

"Oh, very well," said Mitchell, humoring

him. Then he reflected. The indications were that their projected *coup* might fail if Steve's surly humor kept up. Why not improve the shining hour? The coin was obviously bad.

"I'll take it before it gets you into trouble," he insinuated.

Steve lurched to his feet, thrusting an undecorative face over the table. "You think it's bad?" he queried darkly. "You think I'm a fool?" He flung a packet of bills on the table. "Cover that, if you dare," he said. "There's the money for the Post place—ten thousand dollars. It says that's a good dollar. Put up or shut up!"

"You'll lose your money!" warned Mitchell. "Then you'll say I took advantage of you."

"*I* know what *you* think," said Steve shrewdly. "*You* think I'm drunk, but I'm not. *I* know a good thing when I see it.

Don't you—don't you lose no sleep about *me*. I'm—I'm all right, you bet! Now what'll you do or take water?" he fleered.

Surreptitiously Loring had tried the coin with his penknife during this controversy. The metal was quite soft—the knife left a great scar, which he flashed at Mitchell.

"Well—if you insist," said Mitchell reluctantly. He counted out ten one-thousand-dollar bills. "Who'll be the judge?"

"Anybody. Archie. I've got you skinned a mile anyway."

"I am sorry, Mr. Thompson," said Archibald, "but this dollar seems to be pewter, or something of that general description. Aw, give him back his money, Mitchell—he's drinking.

"I won't!" said Mitchell stubbornly. "He forced me into it. He wouldn't have given it back to me if I'd lost."

"Sure I wouldn't," assented Steve. "I'm

no boy. *I* play for keeps, me. Don't be so fast, *if* you please. This money ain't won yet. Cut into that dollar! I was from Missouri before ever I saw Montana."

"Cut it, Loring," said Mitchell. "Show him!"

Loring scratched it with the penknife point. "You see? soft as cheese—rotten," he said. And then the knife struck something hard. A chill crept over him. Stupefied, he scraped the base metal back, revealing a portion of *an irrefutably good dollar.*

The dismayed rascals looked up. In Thompson's hand a large, businesslike gun wavered portentously from one head to the other.

"Go on!" he admonished. His tone was not particularly pleasant. "Peel her off! Yah! You puling infants! You cheap, trading-stamp crooks!" He raked off the

money. "Be tran-tranquil! You doddering idiots, I'd shoot your heads off for two bits! Try to rob a countryman, will you? Why, gentle shepherds all, I've been on to such curves as yours ever since Hec was a pup! You and your scout Loring and your Bickford and your Post!" he scoffed. "Don't open your heads. Bah! Here, you skunks!" He threw an ostentatiously bad dollar on the table. "Take that, and break even if you can. That patronizing half-baked tailor's dummy that called me out of my name will be back bimeby, with his pockets full. I'd like to see him taken down a peg, but I dassent spoil the sale of my mine. Tell him I'm in bed, full, but'll be out in an hour or so. He'll come again to buy me out. Hates me like poison, he does. If you can get him to bite, go it! But I doubt if you'll find even that saphead as rank as you three wise guys. Anyway, I

don't want to see him while I feel this way. My head aches, and I suppose there's some sort of law against shooting the likes of him—or you. I'm leavin' for another hotel, right now. Don't you fellows bother me if you value your hides. If you can skin that puppy, why, sic 'em, Towse! and the devil take the hindmost! Oh, you Smart Alecks!"

He backed out with a traditional wiggle of his fingers.

It is to be regretted that the stringent regulations of the postal authorities will not permit us any report of the heart-to-heart talk that followed his departure, other than the baldest summary. It was marked by earnestness, sincerity, even by some petulance, interspersed with frank and spirited repartee. Mutual recrimination resulted.

Subdued and chastened, Mr. Mitchell was reduced to the ranks; Loring, by virtue of

his own and Mitchell's vote, replacing him. 'Archibald's preference was for a third person still—namely, himself—and he acquiesced with ill grace.

They had but little over ten thousand dollars remaining for the return match; and this, as Loring pointed out with just indignation, would only put them even. They knew that Wyatt would have at least twice that much with him. So they scurried forth and made such good use of the scant time left them, by borrowing, by squeezing both Bickford and the hard-working bookkeeper, and by resource to certain nest-eggs laid by for case of extreme urgency (known among themselves as "fix money"), they scraped together some six thousand more. The "ripping" dinner went untasted. They were hardened, but human.

All ravages of carking care were smoothed away, and they were disposed in

luxuriant and contented ease when Wyatt came.

"Aw, gentlemen, I am punctual, you see!" he announced gayly. "It is weally vewy kind of you to be so obliging—I'm suah. Is the—ah—mining puhson in?"

Mr. Loring, speaking for the trio, affably regretted that their young friend was not, in fact, at his best during Mr. Wyatt's previous call. They had remonstrated with him for his injurious conduct. At present he was sleeping off the effects of his slight exhilaration: they thought it would not be at all judicious to disturb him: they felt sure that, on awakening, he would prove amenable to reason. Meanwhile, the night was young; if Mr. Wyatt cared to join them in a friendly rubber they would be delighted.

"Chawmed, I'm suah!" said Wyatt. "I do not desiah any contwovewsy with that vewy wuffianly puhson while he is—ah—

wuffled. So I shall wait and shall be happy to join you."

The score was close; it was only through ingenious manipulation by their opponents that Wyatt and his partner were forced to win a small sum.

"Weally, gentlemen," drawled Wyatt, looking at his watch, "I shall be fowced to leave you. I have an engagement at eleven, and I weally feah ouah Mr. Townshend will be, as I might say, *hors de combat* foh the night. I have to thawnk you fow a vewy agweeable evening, nevahtheless."

He was carelessly sweeping the money into his pocket when Mitchell, his partner, checked him.

"I beg your pardon, but is that not a bad dollar?" he said.

"Oh, no mattah—no consequence at all, I assuah you," said Wyatt liberally. He would have pocketed the piece, but Loring,

who had paid it, gave him another, and flung the slighted coin over to Mitchell.

"If you're so set on this dollar being bad," he said angrily, "I'll bet you what you dare it's not bad."

"Done with you for twenty!" Mitchell covered it promptly.

Loring drew out a handful of bills. "Here you are. Any one else want any of this?" he inquired captiously.

Archibald shook his head and laughed. Wyatt screwed his monocle into his eye, regarded both sides of the coin attentively, and laid it down.

"Quite bad, I assuah you," he said. "I should pwonounce it about the wohst specimen extahnt."

"Maybe you'd like to bet on it?" said Loring, flaunting the big bills.

Wyatt was evidently nettled. "Weally, you aw wong—I assuah you," he said stiffly.

"If you aw—pawdon me—quite able to lose that money without—ah—inconvenience I am weady to covah it, at least, as fah as what I have with me goes."

"Done!" said Loring. This was not so bad, after all.

"How much? . . . Aw! Seventeen thousand. Exactly. The bet is made, gentlemen. I—ah—propose that we wing the bell foh the pwopwietah and, shahl we say, the clahk, to act as judge and stakeholdeh."

"That will be satisfactory," said Loring. "Allow me, in turn, to make a suggestion, Mr. Wyatt. Put the money in your bill-book, hand it to the stakeholder, and let him give it, unopened, to the winner. Of course, you will first take out your other money. There is no need for them to know that more than a trivial sum is at stake. We do not want to court unpleasant notoriety."

"Quite twue! An excellent suggestion," said Wyatt gravely. He proceeded to put it in effect.

The summoned dignitaries arrived, the situation was explained, and Wyatt, handing the money to the proprietor and the questionable dollar to the clerk, requested judgment.

The clerk looked at the coin, rubbed it, rang it. It gave out a dull and leaden sound.

"Bad, beyond a doubt," he said.

"Try it with your knife," said Loring confidently.

The clerk complied. By mischance he bore on too hard. The knife went through to the table.

A sound of mirth swept to them. With horror frozen on their faces, the three rascals were aware of Thompson, leaning in the doorway—unmistakably sober, given

up to reprehensible levity, holding out a bright tin pail with an expectant air.

Let us give even the devil his due. For Mitchell laughed.

THE END

APR 16 1929